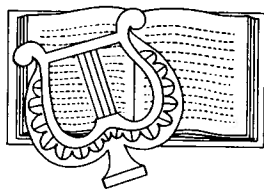






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*In Memoriam*

Ruth Candler Lovett

1935-1964







# RIVERSDALE COURT.

A Novel.

BY

MRS. FORREST-GRANT,

AUTHOR OF 'FAIR, BUT NOT WISE,' 'THE MAGIC OF LOVE,' ETC.

*IN THREE VOLUMES.*

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# RIVERSDALE COURT.

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## CHAPTER I.

### THE CASTLE MEET.

NOVEMBER, in one of the sulkiest, most uncongenial moods of which this reputedly bad-tempered month is capable, had enveloped Riversdale in fogs, drenched it with rain, and was tumbling and tossing every movable thing about with its angry winds, when back came Charles Beechley, looking a perfect illustration, I thought, of November's son and heir.

Sariann was delighted at his return, and after a little while I felt glad too, for under the influence of his sister's gentle sympathetic kindness his gloom lessened wondrously, and, yes, he actually commenced visiting at the Castle, and made himself (as none could do

better, and very few, when he so willed it, could do as well) so much liked by duke and duchess, and so generally popular with all the family, that their desire for his presence soon came to greatly exceed his inclination to bestow it.

It was not long, however, before I perceived that a species of estrangement had risen between the marquis and Charles, and which began first on the part of the latter. But evidently the feeling, jealousy or whatever it was, quickly extended to both, and strengthened daily. Jealousy I felt sure it was—jealousy of each other's different advantages, and of the power which each possessed, almost equally, of winning hearts and popularity. I was the more convinced of this by reason of the vigilant watch they furtively maintained towards each other whenever either of them was in conversation with myself. Yes, they were even jealous of my preference.

That Charles should be so did not much surprise me; but I had hardly expected the noble Reginald would have condescended to care for so simple a conquest as my rustic self. He did do so, however. I saw that clearly;

and Charles saw it too, and, resolved not to be rivalled on this point at least, became quite as forbearing towards my displays of caprice or humour, and quite as considerate of my girlish weaknesses and faults, my “antipathies, sensibilities, and feminine prejudices,” as he grimly called my fancies and opinions, as was the Marquis of Belford himself.

About the middle of November an agreeable change came over the spirit of the weather. Rain ceased, fogs dispersed, the air became clear and frosty, and tempted the Castle people and others to get up riding and walking parties, at this time of year the only practicable outdoor exercises for ladies and non-sporting men.

In both these amusements they so warmly insisted upon my frequent companionship that dear grandmamma overcame her prejudice to the first, and, to my great joy, commissioned Charles to purchase and bring down from London a beautiful and perfectly trained steed for my use.

This he did, and more; for, making my equestrian ignorance an excuse for resuming his old brotherly interest in my affairs and welfare, took upon him the tuition of my first

“maiden rides,” as he called them—an arrangement I was by no means averse to, Charles being an accomplished horseman.

At this time Harry Dormer, who had left Oxford the previous summer, and spent the intervening months with his tutor on the Continent, returned home, and he and Monica frequently joined our walking and riding expeditions. Harry’s presence obviously afforded much satisfaction to Lady Hyacinth; for, besides possessing high rank and wealth in perspective, he was, in his frank, free, joyous style, handsome and agreeable, and altogether a very desirable *parti* for even a proud Riversdale. On the 1st of March he would attain his majority, which event was to be celebrated with all imaginable and unimaginable splendour. Entertainments of every kind over (it was expected they would run through two months at least), the Dormer family purposed visiting the Continent—France, Switzerland, and the north of Italy, Harry and his tutor, to whom he was much attached, accompanying them. “Oh! and fancy my rapturous delight when one day, upon returning home from a walk, grandmamma told me she had been enjoying

a long visit from her dear old friend, Lady Dormer, who had come, almost expressly she said, to"—at this point grandmamma stopped to find her handkerchief. My heart gave a great bound, very wide of the truth, however, and the colour rushed into my cheeks, as seating myself on a stool at her feet, I said breathlessly, "To what, dear mammy?"

For a few seconds she gazed thoughtfully into my upturned face, stroking my hair with her soft white hand.

"To beg me to allow my little darling" (again fondly stroking my head), "my precious child, to accompany them next spring on their continental trip. Should you like it?"

"*Me*, mammy?" with another rampant bound of my heart, followed by a tumultuous rush of smaller throbbings, jumpings, and bumpings, that quite put a stop to my saying more than, "Oh! how delightful!"

Grandmamma smiled, half mournfully, but with exceeding tenderness, at my vehemence. "Yes, dear child, to one of your warm, bright nature I think it will be a delightful and also an instructive pleasure—one which I should be loth to refuse your accepting; nevertheless,

the thought of my precious daughter being removed at such a distance, and for so long a time, from under my eye and care fills me with a disquietude which I feel to be an unreasonable weakness under circumstances so favourable."

I did not answer by words; I knew not what to say : the thought was enchanting! As my Epicurean friend, Sir John Gascoyne, would have expressed it in reference to some favourite dish, all the ingredients necessary for the concocting one of the most exquisite compounds ever partaken of would be there—would make perfect the expedition. I did not stop to define in what they consisted, or that the absence of a certain ingredient from amongst them would have rendered the dish utterly distasteful to my eagerly expectant palate. Unconsciously I was entering an entirely new phase of existence, whose brightness overpowered all others—and—yes—ah me! was making me strangely selfish, or how could I have been so callous to my beloved grandmother's saddened feelings at thought of my absence from her for the first time since my coming to Riversdale? But my departure was

not to be until the following summer; and meanwhile, events occurred as little anticipated by me as would have been the engulfing of our village within the jaws of an earthquake.

About this period, that is, two or three days after the foregoing conversation between grand-mamma and me, a large walking party was formed, among whom were Ladies Elizabeth Bristow, Hyacinth and Frances Riphon, the Duke of Riversdale, his son the marquis, Monica and Harry Dormer, Captain Bell, Sariann and I, and several guests staying at the Castle. Charles Beechley did not go with us: I forget what prevented him.

As his sister and I drove to the Castle, we met Captain Bell, also hieing thither on horseback, and for the remainder of the way he accompanied us. All we invited pedestrians were to lunch at the duke's previous to starting on our expedition.

It was matter of much annoyance to me that, despite the many rebuffs I had given him, the really amiable George Bell would still persist in devoting his attentions to me whenever opportunity offered, instead of to Sariann, or, indeed, to any other girl. To try and hinder



this I forced myself to generally treat him in an off-hand, indifferent way, quite foreign to my usual manner towards the friends of my childhood.

“It will teach him to appreciate dear Sariann’s unobtrusive but true love for him,” thought I. And perhaps it did. One thing was certain: when chafed and angered by my behaviour, Sariann’s gentle affection seemed to allay his irritation more than any other girl had power to do.

Directly we entered the drawing-room, the duke, unconsciously forestalling Harry Dormer,—who, from a distance, was on the look-out for our arrival—took entire possession of me (we all went at once to the luncheon-room), and, seating me next him, chatted, ‘joked,’ and flattered in his merry, jovial style, and at the same time further amused himself by tempting me with every dainty he thought suited, he said, to my youth, health, and beauty.

George Bell and Sariann sat next each other, the latter looking so peacefully happy; for the gallant captain was just then under the influence of one of my cold rebuffs, and seeking

in Sariann's honest, loving eyes that balm for his wound which never failed him in that quarter.

Lady Elizabeth Bristow was softly smiling on her gentleman neighbour ; but in her light grey eyes was that dangerous frozen glitter I had often noticed in them of late. The marquis sat nearly opposite to me, and greatly disturbed my equanimity by mercilessly staring into my face.

The first time our eyes met, to my extreme surprise, the noble Reginald flushed deeply, and bent, yes, actually bent his handsome head over his plate, like a girl, to hide his unwonted confusion. Involuntarily I glanced at Lady Elizabeth (the Castle luncheon was always placed on a large round table, which arrangement did away with all punctilious ceremony, and brought everybody within sight of each other) : she affected to be eating some chicken, but was, in reality, covertly and with steadfast gaze, noting the discomfiture of her recreant lover. Suddenly, and with still lowered face, she looked keenly up at me ; but I had learned of late to be on my guard against these eye-traps of Lady Elizabeth, and, simultaneously with a slight

movement of her head, I turned and spoke to the duke, and so escaped meeting her glance.

Lady Hyacinth talked with, for her, wondrous graciousness and gaiety to Harry Dormer. Every tone, however, in her refined voice betrayed the feeling that she was quite aware she was conferring an exceeding favour upon him by such unusual condescension, and that she expected a commensurate return of gratitude on his part for the same.

Had my Lady Cinth been cognisant of the little by-play of looks and smiles interchanging 'twixt Harry and myself, I do not think she would have felt quite so much flattered by the stalwart Oxonian's apparently appreciative reception of her witcheries.

On my left sat a gentleman, a Mr. Desmond, who held some appointment in the Queen's household—I forget what—and was one of the visitors at the Castle and an old friend of Lady Elizabeth Bristow. He looked about nine and thirty or forty years of age, was a tall, large, high, broad-shouldered man, with a good deal of curly black hair and whiskers, a sallow, unhealthy skin, a hard, aquiline nose, small black eyes, and a bold, unpleasant expression of

countenance. But his courtier-like manners and conversation were very agreeable, especially to ladies, being, through long practice, readily able to adapt both to the prevailing spirit of the moment. Although of a rather grave disposition, he now quickly, and with seeming heartiness, seconded the humour of the lively old duke, joining in his fun and badinage, and with, I thought, unnecessary warmth in his compliments also. And if, by staring, he purposed making me believe he was serious, he certainly ought to have succeeded; for, of all the men I had ever met or been acquainted with, none equalled him in the bold effrontery of his gaze. A glass of wine and a biscuit sufficed him for luncheon, and he had, therefore, abundant spare time to scrutinize my personal appearance, and, perhaps, amuse himself criticizing the simplicity of my unworldly manners and conversation.

I felt much annoyed—not flattered—by this, in my opinion, ill-bred notice; for he would equally, I was sure, have stared at any girl sitting beside him, though all would not, of course, have been half as foolishly disconcerted by it as I felt. Monica, for instance, would

have laughed merrily, and, with pretended satisfaction, have probably told him she was delighted he admired her so much, and would make a point, directly upon her return home, of sending him her photo, that he might examine her features to his heart's content. I had once heard her make just such a speech to a gentleman-acquaintance.

## CHAPTER II.

## THE WALK.

AT two o'clock we all mustered like bees round the hall-door, for there was the usual delay in setting off attendant upon those kind of expeditions, in consequence of certain secret anxieties, plottings, and manœuvrings, among the young pedestrians at least, to secure as *compagnon de voyage* some favoured individual—favoured in their own hearts. But little success attended our wishes: when does success, on such occasions, ever do so? Harry unhesitatingly pushed his way to my side directly he could, with common propriety, escape from Lady Hyacinth. The marquis also joined me; and, the duke and Mr. Desmond continuing faithful, I was inconveniently enclosed within a circle of gentlemen, each of whom seemed

determined to escort no one else. But the duke was not, as he afterwards told me, going to allow himself to be thus easily ousted out of his chief motive for coming by a set of young poppinjays, and thereupon, asserting the right age and position gave him, took my hand and placed it within his stalwart arm, saying in his jovial tones,—

“Now then, beautiful Ennis, you and I will lead the way”; and turning to his son, Mr. Desmond, and Harry, added, “You young fellows can find plenty of fair ladies upon whom to bestow your attentions.”

They of course took the hint and stood aside, while, laughing triumphantly, his merry old Grace marched off with me. I glanced up with a disappointed but amused feeling at Harry Dormer, who shrugged his shoulders, accompanied by so rueful a grimace I could scarce restrain an irrepressible smile from becoming a burst of laughter.

Our plan of walking was, as the duke said, to make a pedestrian tour up and down hills, across a moor, through woods and valleys, and then back to Riversdale; and so chatty and entertaining was my companion on the way,

that very soon I got over my disappointment at not having Harry, Sariann, and Monica to walk with instead of himself.

“Those greedy young dogs wanted to cheat me out of my promised pleasure,” exclaimed the duke as we neared the curve of a hill that terminated our further advance in that direction, and would now send us all flowing back another way. “Why it was solely for the pleasure of your society, my pretty Ennis, that I came to-day. Long walks are, as a rule, distasteful to old fellows like me; but when the exception is baited by so charming a temptation there was no resisting it, you see”; and the gallant old gentleman warmly pressed my arm and gazed down into my laughing face. I was now so intimate with him that his harmless little gallantries only amused me.

“Take care,” said I, “or I shall tell a certain handsome lady at the Castle about you.”

At this he laughed loudly, declaring, as he squeezed my arm tighter, that “I was a wicked monkey; and, if there were not so many witnesses” (looking this way and that, as he spoke, sending the blood in a hot, frightened



rush to my cheeks), he would—yes, he would punish me for my audacity.”

This was going too fast and too far, and sobered me instantly; he looked so recklessly inclined to carry out his threat. Just then we arrived at our destination, where, on a small projecting piece of table ground commanding the show view of the country, the duke and I halted, and the remainder of our party soon congregated round us.

“How desperately fast you both walked!” exclaimed Frances, who, with Mr. Desmond and a Sir William Barret, were the first to join us.

“Yes, did they not?” cried Monica, coming up, with the Marquis of Belford. “Fast!” she continued, sparkling all over with fun, as she always seemed to me to do when amused, “I should mightily like to know what you were talking about that kept you flying along beyond reach of even a chance ear-shot,” and Monica flashed her mischievous black eyes upon the duke.

With a hearty laugh he dropped my hand from his arm, and catching Monica’s placed it there instead, saying.—

“Now, you gay butterfly, you shall take

your turn and walk back with me ; if I monopolize fair Rosamond any longer I shall expect to receive half a dozen challenges, at least, when I get home."

Thereupon they both set off, Monica laughing back at us and looking every bit as well satisfied with her change of partners as if the last was also a young, handsome, unmarried man.

I looked about for Harry, wishing he would come and escort me back ; but he was again in attendance upon Hyacinth, and could not this time leave her.

Frances and I, her brother and Mr. Desmond, walked together, but after awhile we fell into couples, Frances and Mr. Desmond in front, I and the marquis behind.

"Fanny had a letter from Frederick this morning," the latter said, presently, looking keenly at me as he spoke.

"Oh !" I ejaculated, as indifferently as I could, but feeling the colour dyeing my cheeks nevertheless. "What can he think that is to me?" I mentally questioned. "Does he believe me in love with his brother?—or can Lord Riphon have told them of his rejection?"

"I hope he—he is quite well?" I stammered.

"Yes; no, I mean," correcting himself, "he says he is not at all well; some sort of low fever he thinks it is, and which he cannot throw off, and has therefore decided upon going abroad for awhile for change of air."

I was conscious his eyes were earnestly scrutinizing my down-bent countenance, and again wondered what were his thoughts and knowledge concerning Lord Riphon and myself.

"Will he remain abroad long?" I asked, breaking an uncomfortable silence.

"He has obtained leave of absence for two or three months, and intends leaving England at once."

"I am very sorry he is ill," I rejoined, and spoke sincerely, for I liked poor gentle, melancholy-looking Frederick, "and hope the change will soon restore him to health. He is so young that no doubt it will; do you not think so?"

"Yes, perhaps so—in fact no doubt it will, as you say," he replied, abstractedly, and whisking off the grass seeds with a stick he had picked up. "Yes, change is exactly the thing

for a case like his. Oh, yes, he will soon be all right again, no doubt."

We walked on silently for some minutes, I secretly wondering at his evident indifference, considering his brother was so ill—indeed he seemed to be thinking of anything rather than the poor sick man.

"Will not you or his father go and see him before he leaves England?" I suggested, disgusted by his heartlessness.

"See him?" he repeated, turning quickly and looking at me. "Well—yes—I was thinking of something of that sort; I, or one of us. Do you—wish me to go? Have you any message—you—you would like me to convey to him?"

He was evidently in earnest, and his words and confused manner so perplexed me that I could only stammer,—

"Oh no, no message; only that I hope he will be soon quite well again." Then, a sudden feeling of apprehension possessing me that I might once more be mistaken by the invalid, I added, in a hesitating, hurried voice, forgetful at the moment of the disclosure contained in my words,—

“And—and—I think it would be better, wiser not—not to tell him I said anything about your—going to see him; do you not think so too?”

“Decidedly I do!” he rejoined, with wondrous alacrity and warmth, adding in a kind, changed tone,—“poor Fred, I pity him sincerely, and will set off to-morrow and look him up. And, unless—unless he asks any questions, I think it will be best not to mention your name at all; do you not agree with me?”

His voice and manner were so different, he spoke with a lightness and cheerfulness so opposite to his at first slow, suspicious tone, that, had I not been blinded to the truth by my long-standing conviction of his jealousy of Lord Frederick’s superior intellectual abilities, I could not but have then discovered it. But I was greatly annoyed with myself. What possessed me to be so childishly unreflecting as to allow my last words to so plainly betray my refusal of his brother’s love? How contemptibly he will think of me! I mentally decided. He must think me deficient in feminine delicacy, in every feeling of gener-

osity, in every sensation of girlish modesty—everything, in short, that a well brought up young lady ought to possess.

These thoughts so distressed and confused my mind I did not heed his question, and just then we arrived at a stile—a rather formidable-looking affair, which it was necessary the walking party should get over in order to follow the path lying across a large meadow.

Monica, slightly assisted by the duke, had, with her usual bird-like grace, readily cleared the obstruction; but Frances and Mr. Desmond were standing before it when we came up, the one this side, the other that, and the former eyeing the four opposing bars with so rueful a countenance that her companion was laughing heartily, as he begged to be allowed to help her over them.

I had been from childhood accustomed to such trifling difficulties during my pedestrian excursions, and thought nothing of them.

“This is the way you must manage it, Frances,” said I, and, requesting the marquis to go first, gave him my hand, and, mounting to the top, jumped down lightly on the opposite side.

“Oh, that is the way, is it?” cried Lady Fanny, also scrambling to the summit, assisted by one of the gentlemen. Here she was caught, however. The height greatly exceeded what it had appeared to her from below; and now, equally fearful of advancing or returning, she stood, nervously grasping her cavalier’s hand, tottering, and with every movement uttering little terrified shrieks, to the great amusement of the party assembled at the gate, who seemed, as is generally the case on such occasions, quite persuaded the whole scene was got up expressly for their entertainment.

“How you could have jumped, Ennis, as you did, like a squirrel from this tree-top I cannot conceive!” exclaimed Frances, in a half-dolorous, half-reproachful voice. “You cruel cheat! it was a planned decoy on your part! Nothing but your deceptively easy treatment of the affair would have induced me to place my precious self in this horribly dangerous position! What *am* I to do?”

“Come on; I will take you down,” replied her brother, as well as he could speak for laughing, and holding out his arms. Thereupon he lifted her off her perch, and, to her

extreme relief, she was the next instant joining the others in laughing at her own expense.

“Upon my word you *are* improving in rustic elegances, Frances!” interposed Lady Elizabeth in a voice that, despite its cooing sound, had a ring in it I did not like. What *did* that expression in her eyes mean?

“Yes, and you may add robbing orchards, hey, Ennis?—one of old farmer Rudge’s best apple-orchards!”

“Robbing orchards!” repeated Lady Elizabeth, fixing her grey eyes on me with an expression of either assumed or pretended astonishment that set the blood tingling in my cheeks.

“Oh, Miss Denzell! it will not do for you to set such fashions going,” interposed the courteous Mr. Desmond, shaking his head with mock reproof at me; “feminine depredations upon the orchards, and of course the gardens, will, favoured by such an example, become the rage all over England; then alas for the defrauded lovers of cider and fruit! Pray, fair lady, be therefore merciful to humanity; sacrifice your inclinations to principle, and nobly abstain from such practices.”



“Amen! hear, hear!” exclaimed several gentlemen, amid a universal laugh.

“That is a speech quite worthy of your profession and mode of life, Mr. Desmond,” Lady Elizabeth said, in a soft ironical tone.

“I warn you, Miss Denzell, that among your first disciples and attendants in orchard-robbing—or, for that matter, any other kind of robbing—you will find me your most willing abettor, able supporter, protector, and so forth, and so forth,” exclaimed Reginald Belford, taking off his cap and bowing low.

“And pray include me also,” seconded the member of the Queen’s household, likewise bowing, hat in hand.

“I am at your service now, Enny,” laughed Harry Dormer, deserting Lady Hyacinth, vaulting the stile, and with affectionate eagerness seizing my hand, placed it on his arm, and began marching off with me, adding, merrily,—“let us set to work at once. Late in the year though it is, I have no doubt we shall find a good picking in the first orchard we meet. I declare my mouth is watering already at the mere recollection of those yellow and rose streaked fellows we have all

seen so many of smiling derisively down upon us from the tree-tops"; and Harry's joyous, honest laugh rang out, finding an echo in even the most artificial heart present. "Come on, Enny, let us commence acting *reasonably* without further loss of valuable time"; and away we went, followed by a burst of "bravoes" and laughter.

We did not slacken speed until considerably ahead of our party, the majority of whom were detained at the stile, surmounting the obstruction as best they could, many little shrieks and much mirth reaching our ears as we proceeded.

"There, that's all right," said Harry, pressing my arm energetically to his side, and beginning to walk slower, for we were nearing the duke and Monica. "This is what I have been longing for and manœuvring for ever since we set off. We have known each other since childhood, haven't we, Enny?" he continued; "and that gives me a right to take a brother's care of you, you know."

"Ye-s," replied I, not quite responding with *sisterly* feeling to any such care. In truth, the word brother fell rather heavily on my foolish heart.

“Yes ; but”—he lowered his voice, and spoke thick and fast, though in broken sentences—“I can’t go on with this sort of thing any longer. I meant to wait, as my mother advised me ; but with this swarm of fellows round you ready to pounce upon and carry you off—fellows fifty times more worthy of you than I am—I cannot do it. Listen, Enny,”—I was listening with all my senses—“my mother told me you have promised to come with us on the Continent next spring ; is that so ?”

“Yes,” I murmured.

“When we return I shall ask you one question,” he continued, more rapidly ; “but you must tell me now—*now*—whether your answer will be ‘Yes’ or ‘No.’”

He stopped speaking an instant, breathing hard, and gazing into my face. His own was very pale, and his eyes glowing.

I could not trifle with poor, kind Harry by pretending to misunderstand his meaning, imperfectly though it was expressed, for he was trembling all over, and his look was painfully full of doubts, hopes, and fears ; but the first and last evidently predominated.

“Why do you require such an early answer, Harry?” I asked, gently.

“Because—if you feel that—that—you will not be able to say ‘Yes,’ I shall not join my father’s party to the Continent. I shall go somewhere else—America most likely—for two or three years.”

“When we return,” I murmured, “you must put your question to grandmamma; and—and I am, you know, very obedient to her wishes; and, no matter how opposed to my own, I will try to do my best to please her by liking such a disagreeable boy, if that should prove to be her desire.”

Scarcely were these words past my lips when Harry perfectly electrified me by making a bound into the air, throwing his cap high up, and roaring out “Hurra!” at the top of his voice.

“Oh, Harry, be quiet, do!” exclaimed I. “They will all think you mad. What are you about, you foolish boy? Look! I declare the duke and Monica are stopping and staring round. They evidently thought you called them.”

“I don’t care what people think,” panted

my excited lover, replacing his cap, and again offering me his arm. "They will be quite right. I *am* mad—mad with joy and pride. To think of my—poor Harry Dormer—winning the glorious prize from them all in this way! I can scarce believe my senses, and am full of fright lest I should wake up and find it only a delightful dream. Plague that old fellow!" (thus politely apostrophizing the duke). "He is pretending to think I hailed him to stop because he wants to walk with you, whom he would rather have than twenty Monicas. And I have such a lot I want to say to you, my dear, darling love! Oh, when will you give me an opportunity of disburdening my heart of half its long-accumulated load?"

"Listen, Harry," replied I, speaking hurriedly, for we were fast nearing Monica and her companion; "our engagement must for the present remain as secret as though it did not exist at all. Promise me that. If you do not at once I shall annul it—there! Not a soul must be told a word on the subject till our return from the Continent—no one, at least, but grandmamma and dear, good, trustworthy Sariann. Promise me, Harry, quick," shaking

his arm to extort the promise he was very unwilling to give.

“The truth is, Enny, I can’t help it. I am desperately jealous of that handsome marquis. I have been miserably, madly jealous of him and also of his brother.”

“Oh, Harry, how could you, how can you be so silly?”

“Very easily, darling. Belford is uncommonly good looking, and a nice sort of fellow, too, when you know him well. A little inflated with his own importance, perhaps, but, oh, fifty thousand times more likely to please a beautiful girl as you are than I am. And, for that matter, I think so still, and cannot make out how it is you have not preferred him to me, Enny, or his clever brother.”

“Oh, can you not?” said I, smiling to myself.

In my heart the marquis, fifty thousand attractions and all, did not bear comparison with my kind, noble, generous, high-principled Harry Dormer; no comparison on any point—worth, manners, or looks—so infinitely more to my taste was the unaffected style of all three to that of the artificial young nobleman.

I loved Henry Dormer, had loved him longer than I was aware of, and would not have exchanged that love to be Queen of England and Empress of India. So now I have told you my secret—a secret which would have lain hid for ever had not Harry himself thus dragged it into the light.

“What reason have you for feeling so sure of the noble Reginald’s preference for me?” I asked. “Polite he is, of course, to me as to every other lady; but that is all. I do not believe he has given Ennis Denzell a serious thought, or ever will, valuable though she is in your prejudiced eyes, Mr. Harry.”

“Oh, will he not?” mimicking my former tone.

Now while keeping our eyes and thoughts on the two in advance—the duke and Monica, who were walking very slowly—we became quite oblivious of the many pairs in the rear, and started when at that instant a pretty but very affected voice exclaimed close behind us,—

“Oh, the robbery plot is given up then? The rosy-cheeked apples are to be left in peace, are they?”

Turning we encountered the amused, or seemingly amused, faces of the marquis, Mr. Desmond, Lady Elizabeth Bristow, and Lady Hyacinth. It was the latter who had spoken, and a tone of pique marked her words.

Making an effort to withdraw my hand, I whispered Harry to go and walk a little with the offended damsel; but this request had merely the effect of inducing a tighter hold upon my arm. He allowed the others to pass us, however, and followed close behind Hyacinth, with whom he commenced a lively conversation.

To my surprise the haughty girl, at first rather cold, quickly recovered her good humour, and so warmly responded to Harry's badinage that my experienced heart told me love must already have begun its subduing influence over her hitherto unbroken-in spirit—love for the most high-minded, unartificial man she had perhaps ever known.



## CHAPTER III.

## LADY ELIZABETH'S MANŒUVRES.

THERE had been some change of visitors at the Castle, and divers entertainments for their amusement, and, indeed, for the amusement also of the Riversdale family, who, Charles cynically declared, were never contented unless perpetually whirling in a “merry-go-round” of pleasures.

I had for several reasons rather avoided of late going to their dinners and parties. In the first place, Mr. Desmond, for whom I had conceived a, it seemed to me, most unjust antipathy, inflicted considerably more of his company and attentions upon me than was pleasant—than would have been endurable, indeed, had not the marquis, seeing my dislike of the same, constantly interposed his own more

acceptable society between the unconscious object of my aversion and my whimsical self. But this (as I then regarded it) charitably enforced mediation was not agreeable to my woman's feelings, nor should I have needed it had Harry Dormer or Charles Beechley been present. Both were at that time absent from their respective homes, the latter in London, the former paying several long-promised distant visits for hunting and shooting.

Sariann, too, was just now seldom able to leave the good old rector for more than brief intervals; and although my intimacy at the Castle, my almost warm friendship with Frances, made me when there on ordinary occasions feel quite at my ease, the case was very different now the great mansion was crowded with visitors and Lady Fanny obliged to divide her attentions among the many, instead of bestowing them almost exclusively on me.

Sometimes I accompanied friends to the Castle, but the majority lived so far distant from grandmamma's that the effecting it generally involved too much inconvenience on both sides to be often repeated. I am only, of

course, alluding to small dinner-parties and entertainments; those on a large scale I could not go to anywhere until properly introduced. Next spring it was purposed that I should be presented at Court under the auspices of kind Lady Dormer, after which we were to set off on our continental trip.

One afternoon Frances, as was now occasionally her practice, lunched with grand-mamma and me at our early dinner-hour; and, the meal over, she and I walked in the grounds.

It was a cloudy, damp day, but mild and pleasant — that species of weather which country air fills with scent and subdued rural sounds; and for a while we strolled on in silence.

Frances seemed in a very thoughtful mood, and presently disconcerted me by suddenly murmuring in a soliloquizing tone,—

“Poor Freddy!”

The colour flew to my cheeks.

“I hope he is better,” rejoined I, feeling guilty, though I could not have said why.

“Then you know he is ill?” she asked, quickly, looking at me suspiciously, I thought.

“How did you find it out? I mean, who told you?”

“Your eldest brother told me he was ill; suffering from an attack of some sort of low fever, which he thinks—or his doctor, I forget which—that change of air will remove sooner than any other remedy.”

“I trust it is only a slight attack,” sighed Frances, in, I thought, a reproachful as well as discontented voice. “But Frederick is very delicate; has been so all his life. He has the appearance of it, has he not?—so tall and thin and hollow-chested. We often fear he is consumptive.”

“I hope not,” I answered, thinking sorrowfully how unfit he was to die. “We know that the battle is not always to the strong. Lord Riphon may outlive many a healthier man, despite his present delicacy.”

“I so greatly hoped you would have liked him,” she said, presently, in a low voice; “he is so amiable, agreeable, and clever. In truth, I thought you *did*, Ennis?” This questioningly.

“No, no, Fanny,” said I, reluctantly, “I did not; not, at least, in the way you mean. I

liked him to a certain extent ; no one can help doing that, I am sure. I liked him as a kind, pleasant acquaintance—nothing more.”

Frances flushed vividly at these words ; and, with an expression of haughty indignation in her features I had never before seen mar their placid prettiness, said coldly,—

“ Report says you refused him : is that quite true ? ” She spoke doubtingly.

“ Quite true,” I rejoined, bluntly, for her tone and manner displeased me. The colour again deepened in her cheeks ; and after a minute’s silence I resumed,—“ You are his favourite sister, Fanny, and I will confess that to you,—I would not to any one else except Sariann Beechley, who brought me his message and took back my answer, and dear grandmamma, from whom I have no secrets. Yes ; I did refuse Lord Riphon,—refused him unhesitatingly, because, in the first place, I do not love him, and in the second I do not approve of him or wish to love him.”

“ Not approve of him ! ” she repeated, with an angry scorn in her eyes and voice I had not believed her capable of ; “ not approve of my brother ! What *do* you mean, Ennis ? ”

“Knowing as you do the fearfully benighted state of his religious sentiments, I think you ought to understand me better, Lady Frances; you ought to understand my meaning. Such was my opinion of Lord Frederick, that I assure you, had I felt a sensation of love coming into my heart for him—but which, thank God! I did not—I would have as resolutely withstood the feeling as I should a mad inclination to jump down a precipice.”

I gazed at Frances as I spoke, and she averted her face and did not answer. Presently she said, in an excusing and at the same time ashamed accent,—

“His opinions are new to you; but, believe me, they are very general among a certain class of French *litterati*; and,” turning down her eyes, “if you think Belford’s principles are much, if any, better, I regret to say you will find yourself woefully mistaken.”

How provoking it is that very often the mind does not take in the meaning of certain words and deeds until too late to be answered or acted upon. So it was now. Not a suspicion entered my thoughts that any particular motive prompted the utterance of this latter gratuitous piece of

information. There was a something in Fanny's general expression I disliked; but, connecting it with her previous feeling of irritation, I paid it no attention, merely answering,—

“I am sorry to hear you say so; but, be that as it might, he has the good sense, and, I may add, good taste too, to keep his opinions on sacred subjects to himself, which Lord Frederick does not.”

A rather long silence followed, during which I bethought me with glowing joy of how different my noble-hearted Harry Dormer was to these men.

“And, oh!” I mentally ejaculated, “I would not have him like them,—no, not to be possessed of double their advantages!”

“Sixpence for those unreadable thoughts of yours, Ennis,” exclaimed Lady Frances, still a little sadly, but with recovered good humour, and looking keenly at me.

I blushed deeply. Just the most unlucky thing I could have done under the circumstances.

“How is Gurty, Frances?” I replied, evasively; “it seems to me an age since I heard or saw anything of her.”

“Gurty!” she repeated, abstractedly. Fanny’s thoughts were evidently trying to puzzle out the origin of my untoward blush. “No, oh, no, poor child. You have not paid her hermitage a visit for a long while. I think she goes on much as usual, in every way. It is not easy, you know, to perceive any difference in her appearance, unhappy creature! but nurse Prosser declares she is daily growing weaker and more delicate in health,” and Frances sighed.

What could I say? Who could think it desirable, either for herself or those belonging to her, that the life of such an unhappy, such a horribly afflicted creature should be prolonged?

“You were quite right, Ennis, in your suspicions regarding Lady Elizabeth Bristow,” Frances continued, after a brief silence. “She is ceaseless in her endeavours to unravel the mystery of poor Gurty.”

“Oh, take care she never does!” I answered, warmly. “I feel sure Lady Elizabeth is not to be trusted!”

“Although we have known her for some years, neither Hyacinth nor I like her now.



We did at first. Her pleasant, plausible manner beguiled us, as it does most people; but in a very short time she disclosed the previously well-concealed cloven foot; and once that happens one's good opinion is destroyed for ever. I have never yet met any woman of her feline manner that in a few days at the longest something or other did not occur to turn all her sweetness into wormwood; and the contrast makes that wormwood doubly bitter."

"I liked her rather when first I knew her," said I, "but I cannot say I do now."

"And I am *very* sure she bestows no love upon you, *ma belle*," rejoined Fanny, smiling. "You, of all people in the world! Why, she would give all her wealth twice told, her position, her everything, to be blessed with your beautiful face and figure! And for that matter," added Frances, looking at me with an admiring but anxious expression that puzzled me, "so would I if I had it—and so would any one!"

"I am sure you need not, then," said I, warmly; "for you are very pretty, and so elegant, which I think the greatest of charms."

"Yes, perhaps so, in contrast with the usual standard of female perfections; but not so in a

case like yours, so immeasurably above all others."

I was confused by such praise, spoken in a grave, decided, rather abstracted tone, as though some far-off thought filled Fanny's mind, unconnected with me.

"Do you think your eldest brother will marry Lady Elizabeth?" I asked, wishing to change the subject of conversation.

Again I was puzzled by her glance, as she answered,—

"I asked him that question the other day, and he said, 'When I do, I will take care beforehand to provide myself with all the antidotes to poison that have yet been discovered.'"

I laughed. "What an investment to enter married life with!"

Lady Frances had walked part of the way to Riversdale Court, ordering the carriage to come for her, and now proposed strolling a short distance on the road to meet it.

Our conversation reverted to the melancholy subject of poor Gurty's declining health, and possible early death, which Frances spoke of in a saddening voice.

“Would you be very sorry, Frances?” I asked, gently.

“Yes, Enny—*very*,” she murmured, repeating “very.”

Again her thoughts seemed far away. Who was it, or what was it, so often distracted and engrossed them? Undoubtedly Dr. Carlinez, I thought.

A short silence was broken by Frances resuming, in a hesitating manner and in broken sentences,—

“Yes; no one knows how much I shall miss her, poor, patient, gentle little creature! Independently of herself, however, there are—there are matters—events, connected with her past short life—and—bearing upon mine—which have formed a bond of union, as it were, between me and that afflicted child, stronger probably than any by which even circumstances more favouring to sisterly love might have united us.”

Again we walked on in silence, for, as Frances did not volunteer further confidence, I did not like to press the subject. I saw she was wishing to confide in me, and thus lighten some perplexing trouble that secretly weighed upon

her heart, but the which a natural girlish feeling of shyness withheld.

“What a kind, noble-natured creature Miss Beechley is!” she exclaimed, suddenly. “Do you know, Ennis, that lately she has come twice a week, and sometimes oftener, to sit with and talk to Gurty? and the poor child looks forward to these visits with a fulness of delight that almost—indeed, for the present quite—rivals her love of drawing. Prosser tells me that the thought of them (for it is wonderful how tenacious her memory has become on that point) is the light and joy of her darkened life.”

“Sariann noble natured!” said I, my heart glorying with pride and affection upon hearing this new proof of her amiable, self-sacrificing character. “There does not exist her rival (well for poor humanity if the world possessed a few more of her equals!) in every sweet, womanly virtue under the sun.”

“She is very handsome, too, in her own peculiar style,” rejoined Frances. “Rather stiff, perhaps; her head and face classically like some cameos I bought in Italy—the same clear, refined cut.”

“But about Lady Elizabeth, Fanny,” I inter-

rupted, for I felt extremely anxious to learn the particulars: "what reason have you had lately for thinking she is bent on discovering your secret? Has she been attempting any means of effecting it?"

Frances started and looked nervously at me.

"My secret!—what secret? What do you mean, Enny? Oh, yes, to be sure," she hurriedly added, "I remember now. How stupid of me! I thought you—I thought—yes, to be sure—poor Gurty! Well, what do you think of this? Last week was, you know, very wet and stormy, and consequently but little could be done in the way of walking, riding, or driving. For the sake of exercise, so she said, Elizabeth perambulated the long passages, galleries, and corridors intersecting the Castle in all directions, as you are aware—"

"Yes," I interposed, eagerly.

"Sometimes in company with other girls, or occasionally a gentleman; but in neither case did she seek their society—on the contrary, seeming to prefer being alone. Now all this might have passed unnoticed by me but for your warning, which has frequently recurred

to my mind, especially of late. One more than usually wet and stormy day I resolved, should she again set off on her peregrinations, to put an end to my suspicions, if possible, by following her. Watching close from the first, I saw that she unquestionably manœuvred to go alone. This at once confirmed me in my belief that some sinister motive was at the bottom of these constitutional rambles, Elizabeth being of much too sociable a disposition to choose solitude if she could avoid it. Despite the unfavourable weather, the majority of the gentlemen were out shooting, and after luncheon, while we ladies were returning to the drawing-rooms, or elsewhere, away glided Elizabeth apparently in the direction of her bedroom. I could easily follow unperceived, but even had she detected my presence it would not have mattered further than in temporarily frustrating my plan, for I should have told her I had come on purpose to walk with her."

"What a licence of imagination!" I interposed, laughing, and feeling much surprised at Lady Fanny's so coolly acknowledged untruthfulness.

"Oh, all strategem is fair in love and war,

you know," she rejoined, smiling: "and war it was, and is, I assure you; for what do you think? Elizabeth did not, of course, go to her room—I did not expect she would; but hardly was I prepared for the determined line of conduct she unhesitatingly pursued. Turning out of her course she swiftly walked at once towards Gurty's apartments, not looking round, or seeming in the least degree apprehensive of discovery, which proved to me her taking that walk was one of such frequent occurrence she had in consequence become imprudently careless of observation. As she neared the door (obviously well known to her) I concealed myself behind that statue, large as life, standing, if you remember, in a sort of recess, a short distance from Gurty's rooms. Here, peeping between one of the arms, I clearly watched my Lady Elizabeth's stealthy movements. Arrived at the door, she now hesitated a little, glancing this way and that; then, suddenly going down on her knees, looked for a long while through the keyhole, not aware, I conclude, that the baize door within effectually baffled all the dishonourable curiosity of her eye and ear. I almost decided at the instant

to come forward and catch her in her mean act; but second thoughts convinced me it would be wiser not to do so—not to-day at least, until matters were more matured. To give her a good sharp fright, and thus check such dangerous investigations for the future, is of course not only desirable but necessary; to properly effect this, however, she must be seen by others, or another, as well as myself. Elizabeth is not a woman to be easily discomfited, and is moreover quite clever enough, besides being quite able, as far as honour is concerned, to make a skilful move and turn the tables on myself.”

“On *you*, Frances? what do you mean? How could she do that?”

“Well, it would not be the first time she has played me such a trick,” replied Lady Fanny, knitting her pretty brows over some disagreeable recollection, “and if I am not on my guard she will do it now; but she shall not get the chance—I promise her that. I can fancy Elizabeth being all softness and surprise, if *I* was her only accuser—declaring sweetly that ‘Fanny was certainly one of the most curiously suspicious damsels she ever knew! Peeping



through the keyhole!’ with that peculiar little laugh, when she is feeling very bitter, and striving to be very sweet; ‘what an idea! why she was simply kneeling down to tie her sandal. What should she look through the keyhole of that door for more than any other? Gurty’s room? dear me!—she thought Gurty was in a totally different part of the Castle,’ and so on. Oh, no, my Lady Elizabeth! before attempting to catch such a slippery thing as you are I will take care there are other hands, as well as mine, to grasp and secure you.”

“Yes, I think you are quite right,” rejoined I, “quite right. In fact it is impossible to be too cautious if that is the kind of person you have to deal with. But what did you do next, Frances? I am burning with anxiety to know, and trust that the inner door was fast shut.”

“Presently she rose, and turned her face right and left to see that all continued safe, and it comforted me to perceive a dissatisfied expression on her features which proved she had discovered nothing as yet beyond the locality of Gurty’s apartments.”

“How fortunate! How glad I am!”

“Just then approaching steps startled her,”

continued Frances, “and away she hurried, nor did she that day resume her investigations. The next morning was sufficiently fine to allow of our going out, and the majority of young ladies decided to take a walk, Elizabeth among the number, and the few gentlemen also who were not sportsmen. After proceeding a short distance, I perceived, with a sudden thrill of apprehension, that Lady Elizabeth was not of the party, and upon inquiry one of them told me she had remained at home to write a letter which must be sent to post that day. I formed my plan of action in one thought.

“‘You all go on,’ said I. ‘I will return and wait for my friend, and we will together follow you when she is ready.’

“Without attending to answers and objections, I turned quickly and went back. Taking the precaution to enter the Castle by a side door, for fear she should see or hear me, I flew upstairs, and was just in time to conceal myself in the niche behind the great statue, when Elizabeth noiselessly glided by towards Gurty’s rooms. Oh, how my heart beat! for I had been prevented, through one cause and another, from warning Prosser to be more careful than ever

to keep the inner door shut. And, again, I was alone, too, which might prevent my doing anything effectual. However, there was no help now for any of these things, so I must make the best of the affair I could, allowing myself to be guided by circumstances.

“Bending down, she peeped through the key-hole as before; but evidently the inside door was shut, for in a few seconds she stood up. An irresolute expression was in her face as she looked behind and before, to make sure all was safe; then she again leaned forward and placed her ear close to the lock. It seemed to me she heard some sound—poor Gurty’s singular-toned voice, perhaps—for she started, then listened once more, and, finally glancing hastily about, laid her hand on the door-handle, and began slowly and cautiously to turn it. The next instant I was electrified to see the door yield, and open.

“With I really believe almost one bound I was beside Elizabeth, grasping her arm, and positively glaring at her with eyes I felt were flashing like fire.

“‘Elizabeth! how dare you!’ was all I could pant out. Her back was towards me, and so

great was her terror and surprise at the moment that she jumped as if she had suddenly received a galvanic shock, uttering at the same time a kind of shuddering exclamation. I do think, in her wrought-up, excited state of mind, she was possessed of the idea that the poor idiot child she was striving to get sight of was clutching her arm, not I.

“ ‘Oh, Frances! is that you? How glad I am! How you startled me!’ she gasped.

“ Her face was deadly pale, and she leaned for a minute or so against the wall for support. I have never met with any person—man or woman—endowed with such powers of self-command as Elizabeth Bristow. In a considerably shorter time than it took me to recover sufficiently to continue speaking she became again comparatively composed, stood erect, drew a long breath, and, laughing in a wonderfully natural tone, said, scarcely a preceptible tremor in her voice (she had in some skilful way noiselessly re-shut Gurty’s door),—

“ ‘How ridiculous of me to be so frightened! But I neither saw nor heard you before feeling your hand on my arm, grasping me like a vice,’ smiling gaily. ‘And now I am so glad you are

here, for, oh, Fanny, I am burning with curiosity to know what part of the ancient castle this conducts to!’ laying her hand on the forbidden lock: ‘May I go in?’ making a movement to again open the door. I pushed her presumptuous hand aside. I did it rudely, I remember, but could not control myself, I felt so angry.”

“And I do not wonder at you, Frances!” cried I, my cheeks in a flame of excited indignation. “I declare I think *I* should have boxed her ears!”

“I assure you, dear, I felt dangerously inclined to do her some bodily harm,” replied Frances, smiling, but with a more determined sparkle in her soft blue eyes than I had thought them capable of. ‘You know perfectly well where this door leads to, Elizabeth,’ I exclaimed, ‘and that no one has a right to enter it but Gurty’s relations and nurse; be so good therefore as to come at once away’; saying which I took her by the arm, and, impelling her to the passage conducting to her own rooms, left her, and returned to give Prosser an account of the whole affair, and advise both doors being kept locked for the future. I conclude my look and

manner must have been marked by a fierceness and determination of which I was scarcely myself conscious, for I assure you Elizabeth was completely subdued, and did not attempt to oppose my will." And Lady Fanny laughed merrily. "Who would think there was such a wicked spirit in me, Ennis? would you?"

"According to what I have read, yes," said I. "Do you not know, have you never read, that some of the bravest, most benevolent, most determined acts, as also some of the most murderous, cruel, and horrible, have been committed by pretty, delicate-looking, blue-eyed, fair-haired women?"

Frances blushed deeply, but she was not angry at my words, the full bearing of which I did not on the instant realize.

"You are right," she answered, smiling. "Dr. Carlinez told me that the most thoroughly useful, dependable hospital nurses, attending cases of dreadful surgical operation, are generally quiet-looking, fair-haired women—often little delicate-looking women."

"Yes; Florence Nightingale is a delicate, light-haired woman, I have been told," rejoined

I. "Do fair-haired *men* make the best surgeons, I wonder?"

"Ah, that I do not know. Some day I will ask Dr. Carlinez."

"Dr. Carlinez seems your great referee on all points of difficulty," I said, laughing. "I should like to know him, for he must be very clever."

"He is the best and cleverest man I have ever been acquainted with," replied Frances, in a low voice, and bending her head for the brim of her hat to conceal her face.

Just then a turn in the road brought us close to the expected carriage, at one of the windows of which appeared the broad white face of Mr. Desmond.

## CHAPTER IV.

## LADY ELIZABETH BRISTOW'S ANTECEDENTS.

HE alighted and came forward, bowing to me, and saying to Lady Frances,—

“I saw your carriage starting empty, and, guessing its destination, thought I could not employ my time more agreeably this uncertain day than by making the carriage convey me on the road until it met you. I am one of those lazy dogs who hate pedestrian exercise unless pleasantly cheered, enlivened, by charming companionship,” and he looked meaningly at me as Fanny stepped into her carriage.

“As you are not fond of walking, then, had you not better allow me the pleasure of driving you up the hill again?” she suggested, an amused sparkle in her eyes, knowing my dislike of this member of the Queen’s household.



“No, thank you: on the contrary, I purpose, if Miss Denzell will permit me, extending my walk by seeing her safely home.”

“Oh, no; pray do not take that trouble. I am accustomed to walk a great deal by myself, you know,” replied I, with an earnest warmth that I felt was more honest than polite.

“Good-bye; I hope you will enjoy your walk,” cried Frances, nodding and smiling mischievously as the carriage drove away; and Mr. Desmond, disregarding my objection to his proffered society, turned and walked beside me.

His attentions had of late been so marked, and my avoidance of them and himself so equally decided (I had tried to make it appear so, at least, and flattered myself I succeeded to perfection), that I could not now overcome a feeling of extreme shyness and discomfiture that suddenly possessed me, on finding myself alone with him

Volubly I commenced talking of the weather, the scenery, the prettiness and amiability of Lady Frances, anything that suggested itself to my mind at the instant, and to all which he replied in a hesitating, abstracted manner very

foreign to his usual ease and fluency. Becoming more and more thoughtful, and finally even confused in his answers, which were sometimes quite at variance with my questions and remarks, my heart throbbed with apprehension as to what might presently follow.

A party from the Castle rode past us at this juncture, and the brief interruption had for a few minutes the effect of mutually restoring our equanimity.

Lady Elizabeth Bristow and General Mar-dyke, a fine, soldierly old man, were succeeded by the Marquis of Belford and a Miss Case, a pretty girl, who languished and lisped so extravagantly, and closed her eyes so affectedly every time she smiled, that sometimes it was as impossible to understand what she said as to see she had any eyes to open.

Lady Elizabeth bowed and smiled meaningly, but did not stop ; the marquis reined up beside us, as also, of course, Miss Case.

“Who would have expected to see either of you in this out-of-the-way place!” he exclaimed, keenly looking at us with a suspicious, discontented expression.

“I walked with Frances to meet her carriage,”

I hastened to explain, "and Mr. Desmond, who came in it, intending to walk back, politely insists upon escorting me home first."

"Oh, how good of you, Mithter Dethmond!" lisped Miss Case, "for I know you dithlike walking tho much!" smiling down with closed eyes on the courtier; "but perhapth it ithent *alwayth* unpleathant, ith it?" and she glanced shrewdly from Mr. Desmond to me.

"No; sometimes it is delightfully pleasant, as, without doubt, certain *rides* are to you, Miss Case," rejoined the gentleman, with so marked a smile and tone that the fair Janet Case blushed deeply, saying, as she flipped her horse—one of the Castle stud and a beautiful animal,—

"Oh, I alwayth love riding! But you are a notoriouthly lathy man, tho good-bye to you"; and she rode forward to meet Lady Elizabeth, who was at that instant coming back to us.

"Will you join us in a ride, to-morrow, Miss Denzell?" inquired the marquis, still lingering, and speaking in a tone of natural earnestness he had lately adopted when addressing me. "A party of us purpose riding in the afternoon to Inchbrook Down, for a sake of a good canter on the turf."

I liked the idea exceedingly, and said so, but added that I could not give an answer until I had consulted my grandmother.

"In that case, I will have the pleasure—" commenced Reginald, but was abruptly interrupted by Mr. Desmond—

"Look here—nothing will be easier. I never eat luncheon, you know; and to-morrow, while you are indulging in that mid-day luxury, I will ride to Riversdale Court (we seldom start till near three o'clock, so there will be lots of time) and bring back the answer—either the fair lady *in propria persona* or a verbal refusal."

"The affair can be much more easily and agreeably arranged by Miss Denzell's honouring us by sharing in that same mid-day luxury, whether she afterwards join the riding-party or not," replied Reginald, sarcastically.

"And which would bring the matter up to exactly the same point," retorted Mr. Desmond, coldly.

"What weighty affair is it you are adjusting?" interposed Lady Elizabeth, in that measured, metallic-toned voice I now knew well betrayed, to an extent she was little con-

scious of, the fierce feeling of angry jealousy surging in her heart. "Is it your royal wish we should wait, most noble Reginald, until the momentous matter is settled, or go on and leave you to follow when it suits your pleasure?"

He glanced hastily at the speaker with the preoccupied air of one who had quite forgotten her existence, and even now so partially took in the meaning of her words that he unconsciously reined back his horse, under the impression she wanted to pass.

"Yes, indeed," rejoined Miss Case (this time minus the smile), "my horth and mythelf are lothing every bit of patienth we are pothethed of."

"Frances shall have a note from me this evening, saying whether I can have the pleasure of accepting either or both of your kind invitations," I said, anxious to terminate a discussion which was evidently offensive to the two lady equestrians.

"This evening?" repeated the marquis. "Oh, thanks, that will do well"; and, bowing, he and Janet Case joined Lady Elizabeth and the general, and were all soon out of sight.

“That fellow is the most perfect illustration of the dog in the manger I ever knew,” observed the household member, sulkily, as we again pursued our way. “His vanity makes him ambitious of filling his quiver with arrows which he has not a serious thought of using, and is beyond measure jealous if another attempts to obtain one of them; one of them—hem—he pestered me this morning to join their riding-party to-day, and I declare I think he suspected the reason of my preferring to go to Riversdale and walk back.”

“But why did you refuse?” I asked, innocently, my thoughts at that instant running on Lady Elizabeth’s angry countenance and toned voice.

He glanced at me earnestly.

“Well—the fact is, I knew that the carriage would go, as before, for Lady Frances, and the idea instantly possessed me to take the opportunity of letting it convey me to Riversdale Court.”

Again he glanced at my face and stopped speaking. Still mentally occupied with Lady Elizabeth, his manner and words made no impression upon me.

“Mr. Desmond, do you like Lady Elizabeth Bristow?” I asked, suddenly.

He started and seemed bewildered. His reflections were certainly not flowing in that direction.

“Lady Elizabeth!” he repeated, in a half-offended, annoyed tone; “why, what in the name of wonder brought so uninteresting a person into your head, Miss Denzell? Do you like her?”

“I did at first—liked her very much.”

“But you do not now?”

“N-o, I cannot say I do. She has so singularly proud and imperious a manner, which, with all her endeavours to be soft and gentle, she is unable to conceal, or—”

“Lady Elizabeth is a sleeping tiger,” interposed Mr. Desmond, warmly; “be careful you never awaken her, that’s all.”

“Have you been long acquainted with her?” I asked, a something in his general expression irresistibly exciting the question.

“Yes—no, rather, for, though in fact introduced to her a year ago in London, our acquaintance was so slight, and our intercourse so much more so, that I can hardly say I have

really known her until within this last fortnight's stay with the Riversdales."

He spoke hurriedly, and reddened while saying this, which yet more confirmed me in my suspicion that his vanity had in some fashion received a severe blow at the hands of Lady Elizabeth. Perhaps he had aspired to becoming the sharer of her hundreds of thousands, and, as he might reasonably expect, I thought, considering his own deficiencies in every way, been unhesitatingly rejected. It was more likely than not, too, that the rejection was accompanied by a plentiful amount of scorn, and thus taught him a lesson he had not forgotten, touching the tigerish nature of her disposition, or that which he regarded as such.

"You are mistaken in thinking that Lady Elizabeth makes any effort to conceal her imperious temper," he resumed, after a few minutes' silence; "hers is the pride which may in truth be said to glory in its own shame, by glorying in its own contemptible existence, and which, if well looked into, will always be found to be of low-born origin."

"But not in Lady Elizabeth's case, surely?"  
I interposed in surprise.



“Lady Elizabeth’s father was the Earl of Gainsborough; but who was her mother? The daughter of a London tradesman, who amassed a mine of wealth during the time of war by the sale of tobacco. He had commenced with a little shop—I forget in what part of London—and sold cigars, pipes, and small quantities of tobacco to any dirty old fellow who chose to favour him with his custom. From that he rose to the possession of great warehouses, to well-appointed merchant-vessels, to making, in place of a few pounds, thousands of pounds, hundreds of thousands, for of course he now speculated in many ways, and, being a sharp-witted, far-seeing man of business, succeeded in each speculation in a manner that astonished the generality of slow-moving intellects—amazed the whole London world, in fact. Well, the old people died, leaving to their only child, a daughter, a monster fortune, but so tied up and settled upon herself and children, in case she married, that not a shilling of the principal could be touched by her husband, or even by herself. This arrangement was a wise one as it turned out, for the daughter soon after married a wild, extravagant fellow, the Earl of

Gainsborough, who would have made ducks and drakes of her money in no time, if he had been left the power. Lady Elizabeth was their only child, and at the death of the Countess of Gainsborough, some five or six years ago (the earl had died two years previously), she became one of the wealthiest women in England. So you see Lady Elizabeth's plebeian origin is indisputable."

At this point in the conversation we stopped at a gate on the roadside, commanding a beautiful bird's-eye view of the dale, through which flowed the pride of the country—our bright, sparkling river.

"The scenery is viewed to its best advantage from this height, I think," observed my companion, walking to the gate, followed reluctantly by me, for something in his look and manner that day kept me in a very doubtful, uncomfortable state of feeling.

And now there I stood, nervously gazing down upon the valley, longing to speak composedly, but unable to call an idea to my help: never before had the fear of silence made me so thoroughly mute.

"I have not seen many places," said I, at

last ; “ but, judging from such experience as I have had in that way, I should say Riversdale possesses as lovely and picturesque scenery of its kind as can be met with anywhere.”

“ You should go abroad if you are a lover of the picturesque,” he replied. “ Germany, Switzerland, Italy—glorious Italy !—*they* are the lands of poetry, romance, and beauty !”

“ Yes,” I answered, “ I am going next summer.”

“ Are you ?” he exclaimed, quickly turning to me with flushed face, which paled rapidly. “ With whom ?”

“ With Lord and Lady Dormer.”

“ Lord and Lady Dormer,” he repeated ; “ and—and—who else ?”

“ Their daughter Monica—and their son,” I answered, blushing furiously, and madly provoked with myself for doing so, and indignant, too, with him for thus discomfiting me. What right had this bold, disagreeable man to question me so freely ? “ I must go home now, without further delay,” I said, coldly, and turning to move on. “ Grandmamma will be wondering what has become of me ; I left her such a long time ago.”

I made a movement to pass him; but this was not easily to be effected, for the gate lay back in a kind of recess in the hedge, and Mr. Desmond now stood close between me and the road. At that instant, changing his voice and manner so singularly that involuntarily I stepped backwards and gazed at him in amazement, he repeated,—

“And their son! I see—yes—exactly—quite the right thing—the future Lord Dormer, of course, and heir to that great place—Oakfields, or Oak—something.”

All courtier-like suavity had utterly disappeared, and he spoke in a rough, rude, even insolent tone, which I felt convinced was natural to him, the other being merely put on for occasions, as was his dress coat. “So he’s the happy youth, is he?” continued the creature, with increasing virulence. “Well, I might have suspected as much the other day when the puppy”—here he uttered a fierce invective against poor Harry—“took possession of and walked you off from under all our noses.”

I was inexpressibly indignant at behaviour such as I had never experienced before.

“What is your motive for insulting me in

this way, Mr. Desmond? How dare you speak to me in such a manner!" I exclaimed, looking at him with eyes which I felt were flashing angrily. "Let me pass, sir, instantly."

For a moment he was subdued; his little gleaming black eyes fell before mine, as he replied, in a somewhat altered voice, "I have no *intention* of insulting you; but if you choose to think my words do so, I can't help it. I love you—love you as desperately as I know I do hopelessly. In making this confession I am not ashamed of myself, for in truth I am in that respect but rushing along in the same express train with every other man in the Castle—from the duke downwards. I do not ask you to marry me. I have done some foolish things in my life; but, without a single advantage, to offer myself to a creature so beautiful as you are would be a greater folly than John Desmond is capable of committing. Yes—I love you!" he repeated, almost ferociously, "love you in defiance of that fiery look with which you are trying to scorch me!"

He stood close, glaring down upon me like a wild animal. I had never felt so frightened in my life.

“What do you mean, Mr. Desmond? I do not understand you! How dare you treat me in this way! Let me by!” I stammered, in scarce articulate tones, and endeavouring to pass as I spoke. Oh, how I now regretted what before I had always liked—the quiet and solitude of this road! He grasped my arm, bending over me and saying, in an almost hissing accent, so low and intense were his words,—

“No, I will not let you go; you are in my power now, you bird of Paradise, and I will not allow you to escape so easily, I can tell you!”

Oh, words cannot describe my feeling of thankfulness when, at that instant, a cart, whose approach we had not heard, drove rapidly round a near corner of the road. I instantly recognized the occupant; he was a tall, powerful young man, the son of our village butcher.

With a hasty glance at me he was passing, and in a moment more would have been gone had I not screamed out—yes, in my fright and excitement I positively screamed—

“Harper! Harper! oh, stop! stop! I want you! Come here! Oh, come here!”

My voice seemed to electrify him, for he

pulled up with an abruptness that nearly tumbled horse and cart into the ditch; and springing to the ground strode towards me, doubling up his formidable-looking whip evidently with the full intent of using the handle on the person of the man, whoever he might be, who had dared to frighten the granddaughter of their beloved Lady Denzell.

Mr. Desmond had released me and stepped back as Harper approached, and I hastened forward and laid my hand on the arm of the latter, as much to support my trembling limbs as to stay his belligerent intentions.

“Thank you, Harper—that will do—that is all,” I stammered. “I want you just to walk your cart down the hill as far as the cottages. I do not feel quite well; and Mary Sims or her daughter will go home with me, I know.”

But the sturdy young butcher was by no means inclined to conclude the matter thus peaceably, and still lingered, glaring at Mr. Desmond, and fingering his whip with a dangerous expression of indecision in face and figure.

“Prudence is the better part of valour,” thought my cowardly foe, for raising his hat

and wishing me good morning he turned to leave me, apparently unconscious of the retributive punishment awaiting him.

Thinking it wisest for the sake of appearance, I coldly responded to his words and bow, and then pursued my way homewards, Harper slowly leading his horse beside me.

I had known young Harper from his early boyhood, and said, quietly,—

“That gentleman—Mr. Desmond is his name, he is visiting at the Castle—likes me better than I like him; and you just came in time, William, to save me from great annoyance. I feel so much obliged to you. Oh, I cannot express how grateful I am to you for acting so nicely!”

“I should have liked to have thrashed him to within an inch—not a hair more—of his bad life, I should!” replied the young man through his closed teeth: “only that I saw you didn’t wish it, miss, I would have done it off hand.”

I had pretty well recovered my composure now, and laughed merrily as I said,—

“I am perfectly certain you would, William, and quite enjoyed it too. But I am very glad you did not. He had no intention of *frightening*



me, you know; and—and perhaps I was unnecessarily timid.”

By the time I reached the cottages, I was strong and brave as before, and preferred continuing my walk alone, rather than exciting further attention and wonder by asking the companionship of Sims or her daughter. So I dismissed Harper and hurried home. On the way I resolved to say nothing of my unpleasant adventure to grandmamma; the doing so could do no good, and would only make her anxious and uncomfortable every time I went beyond the Court grounds. How could I complain of him to the Castle people, either? What could I say but that he was impertinently forward in manner—declared he loved me, and yet protested he had no intention of marrying me, or words to that purpose. No; I would speak only of it to Sariann—yes, and to old Tursey, who was sure to hear reports of some kind on the subject through Harper, and to whom I should be obliged, sooner or later, to give the true account.

## CHAPTER V.

## THE PROPOSED RIDE.

THAT evening, to grandmamma's and my great satisfaction, Charles made his appearance in the Oriel drawing-room.

"I am very glad you have come home again, Charley," said I, returning his usual warm but silent pressure of the hand; "for just at present I particularly want you. Dear mammy has given her consent—very unwillingly, I am afraid—to my joining the Castle people in a long ride to-morrow; and I know her mind will be quite set at rest by your coming to take care of me. Will you?"

"Will this be your first ride with them?" he asked, sitting down beside my grandmother, and opposite to me. It was our tea-hour.

"No; I have ridden two or three times

during your absence, but on each occasion Harry Dormer was with me, which contented mamma somewhat—making her more comfortable, at least.”

“Is Dormer from home, then, at present?”

“Yes.”

He sat silent awhile, thoughtfully looking on the tea-table, knitting his brows, and biting his lower lip.

“You will not object to accompany my little girl, will you, dear Charles?”

Grandmamma’s gentle voice still possessed the power of exorcizing the dark spirit which yet, at times, cast its baleful spell over him; and it did so now.

He roused himself like a person throwing off a heavy feeling of sleepiness, and his face brightened. “Oh, yes, certainly. At what hour do you start, Enny?”

“Directly after our dinner, which you know is always early. Mamma thinks it will be better for me to ride to the Castle and dine there. But I don’t know,” added I, doubtfully. “I much prefer dining at home—unless you will lunch there, Charlie; will you?”

“Yes, Lady Denzell is quite right; that

decidedly will be the best way of managing.” He spoke with increasing alacrity. “I too will lunch at the Castle, and be here in good time to escort you.”

“Nothing preventing,” interposed my grandmother, smiling. “Never forget, my dear boy, that ‘we know not what a day may bring forth.’”

Charles’s face blanched to a deadly white. “Heaven knows *I* ought not to forget it!” he answered, in a low, faltering voice; “I, of all people in this wretched world!” And, rising abruptly, he walked to the window, and stood, his back towards us, gloomily looking out on the darkened landscape.

A few cheerful remarks and questions from grandmamma, seconded by myself, again partially dispersed the cloud, and brought poor Charley back to the table. But he seemed much depressed this evening; and, after some further desultory conversation and settlement of to-morrow’s expedition, he left us to return to the Rectory.

“You approve of our plans, dear mammy, do you not?” I questioned, as the door closed upon Charles. “You have no objection now to my going, have you?”

“No, none, dear. I always feel that you are as safe under his guardianship as under the care of an affectionate elder brother.”

“Then why does your sweet face take to itself such a grave, almost sad expression?” I asked, smiling; and, going round, I kissed the soft, pale cheek, laying my own against it.

“What it is to have a keen-sighted pair of young eyes lovingly watching me!” replied my grandmother. “The fact is, darling, I was just then thinking of poor Charles; he was looking miserably out of spirits, and I was hoping nothing fresh had occurred to distress him.”

“Yes, I too was struck by his depression, which of late has been much lighter, I thought, than formerly; and he is so considerably kinder to me in manner, so tolerant of my many faults and weaknesses, that I am not afraid of him as I used to be: so little so, indeed, that I feel more than half tempted to take courage, and when riding to-morrow to the Castle beg him to tell me if anything more than usual makes him unhappy. Do not you think I might, mammy? He cannot be offended, surely.”

“Yes, dear, I think you might. No, he could not be displeased by such an expression of sisterly interest on your part; you are such old friends.”

Charles was not much more radiant in spirits the next day than he had been the previous, and as we rode on our way I watched for a favourable opportunity to prefer my question. Viewed from a distance the doing so had seemed merely a nice, simple, sisterly act of kindly sympathy; but now, brought face to face with its instant fulfilment, it assumed a very different aspect, and looked so exceedingly formidable that all my old fears of awakening one of those bursts of passion to which Charles was liable returned strongly upon me.

After a long canter, during which he scrutinized with a careful, critical eye my lately acquired knowledge of horsemanship, and corrected a few trifling faults I still committed, we pulled up our too eager steeds to walk the ascent to the Castle.

“Now is my time,” thought I, glancing furtively at Charles. He was gazing before him with an abstracted and yet apparently a far-

seeing look—a look whose expression was so full of an indefinable pain that my wavering courage was at once restored.

“I am afraid you are not quite well to-day, dear Charley,” said I, feeling my way cautiously, “and—I regret now I teased you to come with me to-day. Why did you not say at once you were ill, and refuse me?”

He smiled—one of his old bright amused smiles that cheered my heart to see.

“Simply, child, because I happen to be particularly well—never was better in health in my life; would to Heaven I was not! for that might account for—well—no matter. What put such an idea into your head, Ennis? Is my complexion less beautiful than usual, or my manner less enlivening than heretofore; or what is it?” All this was said in a subdued tone of bitterness that surprised me.

“I thought you seemed particularly out of spirits,” I rejoined, “and yesterday grand-mamma thought so too, and it grieved her. However, I am glad you are not ill, though *you* do not appear particularly grateful on that point yourself; but I should feel I had been very selfish to bring you out for my gratifi-

cation, if you were in any state of bodily suffering."

He smiled again, but this time with a grim, satirical expression.

"Do not be so sure, pretty one, that if I were 'in any state of bodily suffering,' as you say, I would thus amiably tax my failing energies for your especial gratification."

I bent low over my horse's head to hide the painful blush this lash at my vanity had excited.

"You may not be ill," I rejoined, feeling angry that his want of grateful appreciation of my sympathy should have brought such mortification upon me; "but I think you more than usually depressed in spirits. However, if *you* do not mind it, of course no one else has a right to do so—and—and—there! no matter!" and I hastened Fadladeen's movements by an impatient flip of my whip, that would have roused his proud spirit into a canter up the steep hill, had not Charles grasped the rein and stopped him.

"You have often complained of my quickness of temper, Ennis, but is your own much slower?" he asked, in a tone of almost stern



reproof, that made me instantly feel ashamed of myself; for, after all, the lash had certainly been well merited by me.

I did not answer directly, and presently Charles said,—

“You are quite right, child; I am out of spirits—inexplicably so even to myself, who have for years served an apprenticeship to woe that I should have thought would have hardened me against a consciousness at least of any addition, however much above the ordinary mark.”

His tone and manner were strangely changed; all bitterness and satire had left them, and instead his accent was full only of sadness and despondency that went to my heart. It was such an unusual thing, too, for Charles to speak thus of himself that surprise at the moment prevented my thinking of what to say; and I could only look at him sorrowfully, as for some seconds we rode on in silence.

“Yes,” he resumed, speaking slowly and in a dreamy, dreary tone, “I feel (mentally) so sunk below even my customary depth that I am convinced some great affliction is casting its dark shadow before me. And—yes,” he

added, abstractedly, gazing forward as though striving to see into futurity, “if we but noted such things more closely we should find that all sorrows do so; that without doubt it is because of their baleful, as yet invisible, presence oppressing the atmosphere over and around the doomed person that the spirits, as mine are now, become weighed down by the mysterious, impalpable influence—yes, ere sight or sound of the impending evil has struck on eye or ear.”

I thought of Sariann’s often-expressed regrets to my grandmother at her brother’s many vague, wild notions (so she termed them); but Charles was always so peculiar, so unlike other men in every way, that truly nothing he said or did excited my surprise, and scarcely my attention; and even now I received this, the most eccentric of all his yet declared opinions, as but the offspring of the morbid melancholy oppressing his brain.

“Although you feel, as you say, perfectly well at present, Charley, do you not think it is more than likely you are going to be ill?” I suggested, “and that the gloomy sensations you experience are premonitory

symptoms to mercifully put you on your guard ? ”

“ Perhaps so—I never thought of that. But enough of this for to-day,” he replied, changing his voice and manner as abruptly as before. “ Come on, Enny,” spurring his horse so sharply at the same instant that it dashed forward, and up the remainder of the hill, leaving my quieter steed considerably in the rear for several seconds.

## CHAPTER VI.

## THE RIDE.

“THERE you are at last! Well, that’s right! began to fear I was not to be favoured by a sight of those *beaux yeux* to-day, *ma belle*,” exclaimed the duke, warmly shaking hands with me as we were ushered into the dining-room, where a goodly assemblage of guests sat round a large table laden with delicacies. “How do, Beechley?—glad to see you,” he continued, in his cordial tones. “Run down again to rusticate a bit in Riversdale? hey? Might do less pleasant things. Never was such a country, right and left, far and near, for its bloom of young faces in every phase of beauty; don’t you think so? But sit down here and attack this cold pheasant, or whatever you like.”

“Ennis, you are late,” interrupted Frances:

“here is a chair, dear; come and begin luncheon at once.”

“Not so fast, young ladies—not so fast,” cried her father. “You will come with me, pretty one; I have been keeping a seat near myself expressly for you, and am not going to be so easily balked of my pleasure,” saying which the old gentleman unceremoniously put his arm round my shoulders and thus conducted me to the reserved chair of honour.

“I was in the most profound state of despondent melancholy,” continued the duke, helping me to some dish near, “until your presence, like sunshine, burst on my sight.”

“Indeed!” rejoined I, glancing at his plate, the relics on which betrayed the substantial feasting that had preceded my arrival.

The duke caught my eye, and laughed loudly.

“Oh, that’s nothing!”

“To what has gone before?”

“You monkey! you know very well what I mean; you know I mean that my masticating powers, whether great or small, are no proof of the strength or weakness of my feelings. If, however, they are of either, it is of the first.”

“Oh!”

He laughed again. "Is that your case?"

"Yes; according to my masticating power the strength of my feelings of liking for the dainty dish I am eating is proved, of course."

"Do you know," murmured the gallant old duke, in my ear, bending his head so close that his whiskers brushed my cheek, "you are just the sort of aggravating witch to drive a man—no matter what his age or respectability—drive him helter skelter, to—to—"

"Devouring a whole pheasant, perhaps," I suggested, gravely.

This elicited such an explosive burst of merriment from my hilarious companion that several voices, laughing from very sympathy, petitioned to be told the subject of our mirth; "it was so exceedingly infectious," they protested.

"Shall I tell?" asked the lively old duke, with all the gleefulness of a schoolboy.

"Oh, no," replied I, the colour rushing to my cheeks at the thought of being thus thrust into general notice. He made no answer, therefore, and this silence was of course as silently received by the company.

I was glad that a dignified-looking old lady

on his other hand, displeased no doubt by this long ducal neglect of herself, now entered into conversation with him, and in a sort of half-offended tone and manner maintained it during the remainder of the meal.

My eye rested on Charles sitting far down the table. What a painful contrast between his abstracted, melancholy face and the bright, thoughtless, pleasure-loving countenances around! Poor Charley! I longed for the luncheon to be over, that I might be able to say or do some little kind thing to cheer him.

Mr. Desmond was not present, and I wondered whether he had left the Riversdales; I earnestly hoping he had.

By-and-by we all adjourned to the principal court in the rear of the Castle—the riders to mount their horses, the others to look on, or give any little help they could. The duke insisted on being my groom, as he said, and mounting me.

“Now then, *ma belle*, give a good jump,” he exclaimed, grasping the foot I placed in his large fat hand—and which foot by the way, in accordance with my substantial person generally, is not a small one; I did not even know it was

well shaped, and always viewed it disparagingly.

I did jump vigorously ; but the duke, either unskilled in such duties or out of practice, aided my efforts so inefficiently that, after jumping and struggling and scrambling in a very ungraceful style, I finally slipped, and, losing my hold of the pommel, should probably have concluded the performance by tumbling backwards, had I not unceremoniously gripped the ducal collar, and so saved myself. Being in a merry mood, the accident excited my mirth immoderately ; and there I remained, my foot still in the old gentleman's unconscious hand, and clutching him and the saddle, laughing in a way I blushed afterwards to think of, for my amusement was all the more aggravated at sight of his annoyance and distress, and his bewildered determination to keep tight hold of my foot at any cost. Happily Charles Beechley came to my assistance.

Laughing one of his old joyous laughs, so pleasant to hear, and so unlike his usual self that those standing near looked at him in surprise, he politely begged to relieve the duke of the trouble of mounting me, which request was



instantly and gladly acceded to, and the next minute I was smiling triumphantly from my saddle upon the discomfited old nobleman, who threw up his hands with a gesture of good-humoured vexation, exclaiming,—

“It was all your fault, Ennis! I vow it was, every bit! Why did you keep laughing and flashing those wicked eyes of yours in that confounded manner upon me all the time, you young witch? Positively, I did not know whether I stood on my head or my feet! and you saw I didn’t!”

“I conclude you are not much accustomed to riding,” lisped Miss Case, whom I found myself next to during some restless movements of my impatient though well-trained steed, Fadladeen.

“Why not?”

My equestrian vanity was wounded by so detracting a supposition.

“Oh, because you did not seem to understand the art of mounting very well,” she replied, in the rather provoking tone of superiority of an experienced horsewoman, which in truth she was.

I could not exonerate myself from this imputation without throwing the blame upon the good-

natured old duke ; moreover she would not, in all probability, have believed in such an excuse if I had made it, and her next remark proved I was right.

“Now, you thee, any one could mount me, no matter how inethperienthed he might be, becauthe I depend almotht entirely on mythelf and not on my helper. That ith the grand thecret of the thing ; ith it not, marquith ?” addressing that gentleman as he rode to my side, for we were all now on the move.

“Secret of what thing, Miss Case ?” he questioned, in his habitually supercilious, nonchalant tone and manner.

No whit discouraged by this indifference, she repeated her encomiums on her own skilfulness to my disparagement, but which, to do her justice, I feel sure she did not intend, or was even conscious of ; her thoughts were solely engrossed by self-admiration, and anxiety to excite it in others.

“Now ith not that the right way, marquith ?” she concluded.

“Well, yes—in the case of a creature of such infinitesimal proportions as yours perhaps it is,” he replied, smiling ironically. “The

only skill necessary on the part of *your* groom would be that he did not, by an imprudent touch of his hand, send you flying altogether over instead of into your saddle."

I felt myself colour as he coolly uttered this contemptuous reflection upon the fair Janet's diminutive stature; but evidently his words were very differently understood by herself. So far from being hurt, or in the slightest degree offended, she regarded his whole speech in the light of a compliment, though of what kind I couldn't conceive.

"Oh, marquith! how *can* you!" she exclaimed, with a beaming face.

"How can I? Upon my word, I do not know, nor have I any intention of trying," he replied, carelessly.

"Trying!—trying what? What do you mean?" inquired the perplexed fair one in a graver voice.

"Mean? Ah, yes; I don't know. What were we talking about?" drawled the impudent Reginald. "Oh—ah, to be sure—I remember now; you were saying your great fear when mounting your horse was the being pitched over its back—was that it?"

Janet Case's face suffused with crimson to the roots of her hair. "Ath if *I* wath afraid of anything conthernin riding!" she began, indignantly; but further words were checked by Charles Beechley's joining our party on her side and entering into conversation with her, although they were unacquainted, even by name. He was angry at having, through some unavoidable delay, been balked of his intended escort of me, and his place filled by one whom he disliked; and under the influence of his present gloomy, defiant mood would have talked, and talked well, to anybody. Charles was naturally a reticent but not a shy man; nor was it possible to disconcert or humble him,—an attempt to do either, as I had often observed, was certain to result in the discomfiture of the intending discomfiter. The noble Reginald, notwithstanding his haughty bearing and rival advantages, had so often experienced mortifications of this nature in his conflicts with the clever barrister that he now generally shunned any encounter of wits with him. It was not that Charles said much either; his answers were usually short, cynical, and so directly to the point that they seemed more than enough for

any individual to whom addressed. Often he said nothing; his expression of countenance and manner were sufficient. He was not in a mood to-day, I knew, to be worried by *contre-temps*, no matter how trifling, for, despite his repudiation of all bodily suffering, it appeared to me impossible any one could look so frightfully ill, and so woebegone, and yet be free of either some great present mental distress, or that some dangerous sickness was not fast coming upon him.

When in a depressed mood, grandmamma and I were the only people whose cheering influence Charles was open to, and I wanted now to talk to him, and regretted the interposition of Janet Case's little person.

Presently my wish was granted.

Charles soon became moody and silent, a style of companionship wholly distasteful to the lively, lisping fair one, who thereupon embraced the first opportunity a narrow part in the road afforded to fall back and join more congenial society, and now only the marquis and Charles remained on my right and left.

"This is a charming day for riding, is it not,

Charley?" said I, turning and smiling upon him.

A light flashed into his face as into a darkened room.

"Yes, it is very pleasant," he answered, readily. "Enny, you are not holding your bridle in the orthodox fashion," he added, and, with the easy familiarity of our brother and sister friendship, bending forward and adjusting the reins between my fingers; "there! that's the thing. Upon all these little points, according to their correct or incorrect practice, depends your obtaining a secure command over your horse, and also a sure seat in your saddle; bear that in mind."

The marquis's steed at that instant plunged and reared with a violence that startled me, and set my usually gentle animal, Fadladeen, capering and curveting in sympathy with his companion. We were in advance of the party.

"Shall we have a canter now, Miss Denzell?" suggested the noble Reginald, in a tone of haughty impatience that seemed wholly uncalled for; "it is dull work, this walking, is it not?"

I glanced at Charles, and the expression in

his face made me urge my horse at once into a rapid movement, which I took care should not flag for a considerable time—not, in fact, until the more amiable expression on both countenances told me that the combination of cheering influences had already done good work with their irritated tempers. But what was the cause of offence between them?

The marquis had spoken dictatorially, it was true, but Charles was wont to treat such manner with contemptuous indifference. And why *was* the first so impatient? Certainly, thought I, men are very difficult creatures to understand! I used to think I could read their characters and their feelings as I did a book—with the same facility and clearness. Ah me! I now see it was such-like reading as I formerly taxed poor Miss Pitt's patience with during my German lessons: in every long, difficult page through which I perseveringly plodded, for one word I comprehended ten or twenty followed which I did not.

“Do you admire a lisp, marquis?” I asked, as we abated our speed on descending a rather steep hill: “some gentlemen do, I know; and ladies too, for that matter.” This was a very safe

subject to speak upon, I secretly decided, and could only excite amusement.

“Admire a lithp ?” he replied, smiling ; “well—yeth—it hath rather a pretty innothent thound in it ; don’t you think tho ?”

What possessed Charles this afternoon ! He uttered a short, scornful laugh, “Yes—the pretty innocency of a simpleton.”

“Perhaps so,” rejoined the other, in an angry, aggravating tone of self-sufficiency. “But, you see, when I admire a person or thing, it is a matter of profound indifference to me whether my admiration be wise or foolish, right or wrong ; *I* am gratified—and that is all I care about.”

“Exactly ; that is just what I should think of you,” retorted Charles, his cold, quiet, cynical accent speaking volumes of contempt at the selfish egotism contained in the marquis’s answer.

A red spot burned in the cheeks of the latter. “Yes,” he added, slowly and with increased haughty conceit, “as I say, if *I* am satisfied, that is of course enough.”

As the marquis had from the commencement of our acquaintance been unmistakably demon-



strative in his admiration of myself, I naturally felt extremely indignant at these offensively boastful words. I was the more angry because certain that in the wrathful heat of the moment he had purposely sacrificed my feelings to, he hoped, punish Charles through me for the mortification he had just inflicted upon his vanity. Inwardly I chafed too that neither by word nor manner could I show my incensed state of mind without thus acknowledging a consciousness of his admiration, the knowledge of which my girl's pride revolted against betraying. More than that, I was nervously anxious to avoid, by any injudicious remark, increasing the fermentation already frothing the angry spirits on either hand. It was beyond my powers, however, to make any attempt at self-control to enable me to further prosecute my peace intentions, and, having reached the bottom of the hill as the marquis ceased speaking, I turned to Charles (ignoring the former) saying, "Let us have a good long canter on this nice straight road"; and away we went.

Fully expecting, indeed hoping, the marquis would indignantly drop back and join his more

appreciative friends in the rear, especially as my unceremonious movement, having taken him unawares, left him some yards behind, I was surprised to see him the next minute by my side. Presently, with recovered good humour—indeed more, with an apologetic, propitiatory look and voice—he proposed my stopping a brief while at a point we were approaching, from which could be seen the most picturesque view of the Castle in all the country round.

Upon making this advised halt, it was a relief to me to be immediately surrounded by our party, and I earnestly hoped that Lady Frances or some one else would join us for the remainder of the ride, or that either the marquis or Charles would bestow their company elsewhere. Of the two, I preferred retaining Charles; he, I knew, did not consider he was conferring an honour by admiring me.

“Oh, what a thweet, lovely thene! How pretty the Cathle lookth from here!” exclaimed Miss Case.

“Janet, why don’t you break yourself of lispig?” interrupted the marquis, a mis-

chievous gleam in his long dark eyes. "I assure you some clever folks exceedingly disapprove of it,—even think it betokens idiocy."

"I don't lithp muth," replied Janet, in an affectedly injured tone, "and not at all when I thpeak thlowly : bethidth, I don't thee anything idiotic in it, if I did ; that mutht be only a thilly notion of your own, you rude man !"

"Are you speaking slowly now ?" he asked, gravely.

"Yeth, to be thure I am ; can't you hear ?"

"Yes, perfectly well."

The ladies all laughed, and among them myself, I am ashamed to say.

"I do not thee anything in what I thaid to laugh at," said little Miss Case, looking round with flushed, indignant face.

"Do not be cross about it, my dear girl," exclaimed the marquis, "it is not worth the trouble ; besides, remember, if you get into a passion and talk fast, you will inevitably take to lisping again as desperately as ever."

Frances was near me, and, taking advantage of the opportunity, I suggested to her that we should ride on together. "And you come too,

Charley," I added, *sotto voce*, to that individual, who, with a set expression of stern indifference to persons and things around him, was abstractedly contemplating the view.

"I do not wish to laugh at Miss Case again," I murmured to Frances, "it is so rude; but if we remain I know I shall be unable to help doing so."

"And so shall I," she answered, "and therefore willingly second your judicious proposal."

The rest of the ride was very pleasant, and quite compensated me for its previous disagreeables. The marquis made no further attempts to join us, but rode with others more congenial to his taste, and poor surly Charles cheered up and became delightfully witty and pleasant in companionship with only Frances and me.

"If my heart were not already given away, I would not undertake to answer for consequences, if often in the society of your rector's son," whispered Lady Fanny, as I bade her good-bye upon our return to the village, where I left the riding-party, and, escorted by Charles, went home.

## CHAPTER VII.

## VISIT FROM THE MARQUIS OF BELFORD.

ONE morning, a few days after our ride, I went into the garden to make a nosegay of bright berries, monthly roses, and such blossoms as yet enlivened the beds and bushes around.

The simplicity of my taste in the selection of flowers always surprised, and I suspected secretly annoyed, the more fastidious floral judgment of Graham, our head gardener, who could supply me, he said, with any amount of hothouse and greenhouse blooms, which were far better suited to the Court than those things, contemptuously indicating my pretty bright berries, coloured leaves, and lingering blossoms.

It was a pleasant, mild day, with just sufficient wind to tease me a little by blowing my long

curls over my eyes, while particularly requiring the full use of those organs in forming my posy. I was in the act of despoiling a monthly-rose bush of its scattered buds when my ear caught the sound of approaching steps on the gravel, and to my exceeding astonishment, for it was scarcely half-past eleven o'clock, saw the marquis coming towards me. He advanced very deliberately, one hand in his coat-tail pocket, the other shaking out a handkerchief, which gracefully diffused so rich a perfume it reached me while he was yet in the distance.

“This south-west breeze seems to so particularly suit you, Miss Denzell, it is quite unnecessary to ask how you are to-day,” was his first greeting, as, with a lingering clasp of the hand, he gazed into my face. Remembering his conceited words, I felt by no means as flattered as without doubt he thought I was, and replied carelessly, though unable to suppress my provoking blushes, “Oh, a south-west wind always reminds me of those rare and amiable natures which can agree happily with even the most cantankerous tempers and contradictory characters.”

He did not answer—indeed he seemed not to have heard me, and the thought came into my mind, had Frances, knowing I should sympathize with them in any trouble, commissioned him to come thus early to tell me of some family sorrow. Lord Riphon and poor Gurty had been very ill lately. Were they worse,—were they dying, or dead?

“The duke and duchess and your sisters, are they well?” I asked.

“Thanks, yes—all quite well.”

“And your brother, I hope he is better—indeed, well by this time?”

“Yes, much better; he is at present in Paris, but talks of wintering somewhere in the south of Italy, if he can obtain leave of absence for so long a period from his military duties.”

“But will not decided ill-health justify his exacting it?”

“Perhaps so,” replied the marquis, indifferently; adding, after a short pause, “I should exceedingly like to winter abroad myself: any part of the world would, in my opinion, be preferable to this wretched little island of fogs and fevers. Do you not agree with me?”

approaching nearer as he spoke; "would you not like it also?"

"Very much; but not," I said smiling, "because of fogs and fevers. The first I care nothing about, excepting as they affect dear grandmamma and other delicate people; and as for fevers, well, according to report, we are not worse off in that respect than they are in other countries, or, for that matter, as bad as in the majority of Continental towns."

"Then why would you like to go?" he asked, earnestly.

"Oh, for many reasons: what girl would not like it? Think of all the beautiful things to be seen, the endless variety, the pleasures!"

He drew yet closer, and lowered his voice, though there was no one else to hear him,—

"Shall we winter abroad together, Ennis?"—it was the first time of his addressing me thus familiarly; "will you be Marchioness of Belford, and come with me? All the world is before you, and all power to choose where you like."

I was speechless with amazement. Since the commencement of our acquaintance until the present the marquis had never (in my opinion)



shown the slightest signs of love for me, or attempted to win my regard. His interposition between myself and Mr. Desmond I considered as merely the kind politeness due from him, or any gentleman, in defence of the comfort of a young-lady visitor in his father's house; nothing more. Had I given him a serious thought, which I never had, I should have believed him as perfectly indifferent to me and my affection as I was to his; in fact, one of the last men in the Castle who would wish to make me his honoured wife.

Upon second thoughts I was persuaded the off-hand, uncereemonious proposal was merely a joke—and a very impertinent one too, I decided, and highly offensive to my maidenly feelings on so important a subject as matrimony. Without vouchsafing an answer, I took up my garden basket, knife, scissors, &c., and coldly saying I was now going in, would he like to see grandmamma and rest himself awhile, turned to leave the garden.

This treatment did not seem to in the slightest degree offend or annoy him; on the contrary, he looked exceedingly satisfied with it. Evidently he was impressed with the flatter-

ing conviction that to my unsophisticated mind the presentation of his handsome self, his present grandeur and future dukedom, for my simple acceptance was too magnificent an offer to have been made in earnest; he was but amusing himself with my rustic girlishness, and I was very naturally, and indeed very properly, displeased in consequence.

All this was clearly legible in his smile of ineffable conceit and encouraging tone of voice, as, intercepting my departure, he said, blandly,—

“Oh, you must not leave me in this painful state of suspense, cruel girl! I *must* have an answer before you go; for believe me I never was more in earnest in anything in my life,—I am indeed!”

I looked up, and by his glowing eyes saw he really was serious, despite his vain, supercilious manner.

“You really are in earnest?” I repeated, my heart throbbing violently; for under any circumstances the position I was placed in must always be a distressing one to every woman.

“Never more so in my life,” he answered, confidently.

“Then I will be serious too,” I said, feeling my eyes flash indignantly. “You have imposed an unpleasant duty upon me, but I am the less reluctant to perform it, feeling convinced that, so far from breaking your heart over my answer, you are much more likely to go back and laugh heartily at it, and at what you will consider my unprecedented folly.”

“Laugh?—laugh at what? I do not understand you,” he replied, in a changed tone.

“Thank you for the honour you intended me,” I continued, with a passionate sensation of irrepressible sarcasm, “but I have no desire to winter abroad, in—in that way; and I have no wish—never had, nor am ever likely to have—to become Marchioness of Belford.”

The blank look of astonishment, almost of bewilderment, with which he heard these words struck my love of the ludicrous so keenly that, but for the excessive paleness of his face and the unmistakable expression of pain accompanying it, I should have burst into an amused laugh.

“Surely—you are jesting?” he stammered; “you always seemed—I always thought, at least,—you—you liked me—better—”

“No, indeed I am not jesting,” I interrupted; “I could not jest on such a subject. To use your own words, I never was more in earnest in anything in my life; nor does the least likelihood exist of my ever changing; so please let me pass,”—the path was narrow at this part, lying between flower-beds, and he stood just in my way.

For the proud, handsome young Marquis of Belford to be rejected by *any* girl whom he designed to honour by making his wife was a humiliation neither he nor his family had conceived it possible could come within the range of human events; but when that girl was merely a poor inexperienced country maiden, charitably adopted by her grandmother, the case was, without doubt, so bewildering that no wonder it deprived him, for the moment, so entirely of self-control that positively his words and manner became quite natural. I had never heard or seen him thus inartificial before.

“I cannot believe you are in earnest, Miss Denzell,” he exclaimed, “that you understand me, in fact; perhaps I do not understand you?” this in an anxious, questioning voice and short

pause, in hopes I would utter some little word or sound of encouragement. I did not ; and he resumed,—“ This, at any rate, will be plain ; this will be clear—clear as the pure depths of those glorious eyes of yours ! ”

Again he came close to me, his voice becoming low and unsteady, and gazing into my averted face with looks that seemed to scorch me.

“ I love you, Ennis!—love you deeply, wildly—my family and friends would say, madly ! Well, and that is true,—I do love you madly ! ”—a ring of his old self-importance jarred through the last words ; “ but what care I for that—for the whole world,” he continued, in an accent of magnanimous self-sacrifice, “ in comparison with my love for you ! Your face and form were moulded to grace a throne ; and your elegance and sweetness would adorn the highest position in the land ! ”

“ And so altogether you are not likely to be ashamed of me, you think, despite my great inferiority to yourself and family ! ” was my unspoken thought.

The noble marquis was certainly sincere in the passion he professed for me ; but at the same time he, unconsciously to himself, be-

trayed a feeling of such intense appreciation of his own advantages over mine, and of the honour he proposed doing me, that every sentence he uttered chafed and angered instead of propitiating me. In his irrepressible vanity he made it clear that my personal appearance and manner had been thoroughly estimated, and their merits placed in the scales beside the generously disinterested sacrifice he meditated making to love; and, therefore, so offensive was the style of his offer that, had no other objection existed to my heart's acceptance of the same, I feel sure I should have indignantly refused it.

“Yes, I perfectly understand you,” I said; “infinitely better, in fact, than you do Ennis Denzell, or you would never for one moment have presumptuously flattered yourself—yes, marquis, I cannot help saying so—*presumptuously* flattered yourself with the belief she would consent to become any man's wife whose family and friends regarded his love for her in the light of a *madness*, and consequently herself an objectionable intruder amongst them.”

“Miss Denzell!—Ennis! what a construction

to put upon my words!" he exclaimed, in tones of genuine surprise and distress. "Believe me—"

"Oh, pray let us end this painful affair!" I interrupted. "Why will you not be content with the answer I gave you? It was plain enough. Why oblige me to make it unpleasantly plainer? Under no circumstances would I be Marchioness of Belford. Setting all else aside, I do not love you—there! You are not a style of man I could love. And now, please, let me pass"; and in my agitation I almost pushed him aside, and ran into the house and upstairs to my bedroom, where from one of the windows I saw my noble lover riding away as deliberately as though he had just paid a quiet morning visit to grand-mamma. His self-control must have been great to thus assume this composed demeanour, for my departing glance in the garden rested on a face so white and so full of bitter, amazed disappointment and mortification that, notwithstanding my indignant feelings, my heart was pained at the sight.

## CHAPTER VIII.

THE CASTLE PARTY—DIVERS LITTLE MATTERS  
CONNECTED THEREWITH.

THAT evening came a note from Lady Frances. It was kind, but not in so frank a style as usual, I thought; and a something of Lady Hyacinth's pomposity ran through it that rarely showed itself in Frances.

I perfectly understood the hurt, injured tone, and felt she was justly punished; for I knew well that none in the Riversdale family considered the son and heir of more importance than did Lady Fanny; and, warm and sincere though her friendship was for me, I was certain she would have regarded my marriage with this unrivalled personage a most derogatory alliance for him. But to reject the Marquis of Belford! I, simple Ennis Denzell,



the daughter only of a poor baronet, refuse to be Marchioness of Belford indignantly, scornfully!

With mingled feelings of honest admiration of my pride, of genuine sorrow at not gaining the love of the first girl he had wished to make his wife, of angry mortification at his failure and the humbling manner of it, he went at once home, and relieved his ill-used heart by repeating almost word for word all that passed between us to his sisters. (Frances told me this some time afterwards.) He did it the more willingly, even boastfully as regarded myself, she said, because he knew they thought less highly of Ennis Denzell than she deserved, than he, with his superior powers of penetration, saw she richly merited. It was evident, Frances continued, that, despite his own bitter mortification, he gloried in their being thus punished through the very girl they had done such injustice to.

“What he meant by our doing you injustice, you know,” Frances added, “was our thinking that no girl, not the highest in the land, would refuse our handsome brother if he made her an offer of his heart and hand, and

you, notwithstanding your superlative beauty, would prove no exception. Reginald was convinced, he declared, that you would neither marry him nor any other man unless you loved him, and really seemed to derive a sort of satisfaction in narrating and dwelling on the scornful treatment his magnanimous proposal—for so in his bitter humiliation he derisively termed it—had met with at your hands.”

But to return to the note.

“Belford” (usually to me she called him Reginald) “had forgotten that morning to deliver the message she had given him for me, begging I would come to a party on Friday next at the Castle. They were all particularly anxious I should do so, as an old friend, a Count D’Alton, who had just arrived, and intended staying with them a short time, had promised to entertain the company by a display of Oriental feats of legerdemain, in the practice of which he was wondrously skilful, &c.”

“Count D’Alton! Count D’Alton!” I repeated thoughtfully, after reading the note aloud to my grandmother. “I have heard that name before—somewhere—from some one. Yes, now I remember—to be sure; yes—it

was the name of that singularly handsome man I told you of, mammy, whose photo I saw in one of the Castle albums. I must say I should exceedingly like to see the original of that magnificent face and form," looking with petitioning eyes at my grandmother. "And sleight-of-hand tricks too!—they are so amusing, are they not, dear mammy?"

"Yes, darling; when well performed I do not know any kind of exhibition more agreeable to witness." Grandmamma was silent for a minute, then added, rather reluctantly, "It will be a very large party; but I do not like to refuse you. Well, yes, dear, you may write and accept the invitation. The principal motive of attraction being the count's performances makes it suitable for all ages, even children."

"Such as myself," laughed I. "Usually Frances in her notes of invitation adds the little comforting assurance she will meet me in the cloak-room or the hall, and accompany me to the drawing-room; but this contains no such kind promise, you see, mamma; so, what shall I do?"

"Oh, I will look to that, darling," replied

grandmamma ; “ you will be tenderly cared for, my precious one, depend on me for that.”

So it was all delightfully settled. I was to be chaperoned by good-natured Lady Dormer, who, with Monica, promised to call and take me up on their way to the Castle.

The Beechleys had, of course, been also invited ; and Charles, whose poor, harassed soul still lay spell-bound by the boding spirit of evil he spoke of on the day of our last ride, begged his sister to accompany me, and allow him to remain at home with their father. But this she would not agree to ; and it was just the kind of party to cheer and do him good, she said, and go he must to take care of Ennis. Had Sariann granted his request, had she gone, ah ! what then ? Would the *secret* have still lain buried in the past—buried, perchance, until that last great day, when nought can be longer hid, when all things shall be told, all things revealed ? Who knows ? Who but the great Omniscient can say ?

Sariann and the rector came to spend the evening quietly with grandmamma ; and to see me, Dr. Beechley said, in my gala attire for

the party. This attire consisted of the finest tarlatan, white, spotted over with rosebud sprigs, and white and rose-pink camellias in my hair and on the bosom of my dress.

The party was a large one, as grandmamma anticipated; too large to have allowed of my juvenile presence there but for the promised exhibition.

It was a brilliant scene to burst in upon from the chill, dark, outer world. The whole Castle seemed blazing with light, and stirring and resounding with life and voices and laughter. The great drawing-rooms were grouped and scattered over with gaily dressed people, old, middle-aged, and young; while, judiciously placed in some distant quarter, in order that the harmony might gently charm the ear without overpowering all other sounds and preventing conversation, was a first-rate London band, headed by its great master,—I forget his name, I am ashamed to say. Altogether my inexperienced senses were bewildered into so school-girl a state of excited staring and confusion, that hardly could I understand, and not at all respond to, the jokes and badinage

of the duke, who, meeting us at the door, unceremoniously left the rest of the company and escorted us to seats in an inner drawing-room, and placed himself beside Monica and me. Lady Dormer remained in the first room, talking to the Duchess of Riversdale.

“Oh, enviable little Monica!” thought I, “how thoroughly self-possessed she is!—as composed and merry, entering keenly into and enjoying the duke’s fun, as though only we three were there in the room, and paying no attention, in her sparkling, chatty way, whether it was me or herself the duke addressed his conversation or compliments to.

During our progress through the first drawing-room I had been greeted by a distant, stately recognition from the marquis, and had shaken hands with Hyacinth and Frances.

The manner of the elder sister, always reserved and haughty to every one, or so at least with few exceptions, was much the same to me as usual, the only perceptible difference being a more marked scrutiny of my face than she had ever before seemed to think it worthy of, mingled with an unconscious expression of curiosity to discover of what those charms con-

sisted which the great Reginald Belford had declared were *irresistible*.

Frances looked unusually flushed and excited; but her welcome was kind and cordial. Even during our brief interchange of civilities, however, I noticed an abstracted, inattentive bearing in her behaviour and appearance that puzzled me, as it seemed in no way connected with myself—my refusal of her brother, I mean.

It was the first time I had seen such simple discomfiture in one of that thoroughly world-tutored family, and my curiosity was instantly aroused by it.

Presently Lady Dormer joined us; and soon after the duchess, looking superbly handsome in purple velvet and diamonds, swept into the room and came towards us.

A slight frown contracted her smooth brow as she commenced at once, in a half pettish, half good-tempered manner, blaming her husband for leaving all the burden of receiving their guests upon her, when he knew she was not well that evening; moreover, when people were expected unknown to the rest of the family, and particular friends of his own,—they had just

arrived, and were inquiring for him, she added.

While thus delivering herself, the great lady glanced several times meaningly at me, and with a certain something of reproof in the look, as if to imply that at my door lay the cause of the old gentleman's truancy ; so, at least, my innocently guilty conscience whispered me.

"Well," he said, with a heavy pant, by way of sigh, as he lazily rose and fixed his laughing blue eyes provokingly on my flushed countenance, "I suppose I must obey orders. But there—that's nothing new: I have been bullied all my life, and am pretty well accustomed to it by this time."

"You seem to have thriven very fairly, notwithstanding," rejoined his wife, in jesting allusion to his stalwart proportions. "I think our guests are all come now, and I shall sit down here and rest for a few minutes," she continued, seating herself beside Lady Dormer, whom I knew she was very partial to, as, indeed, were all who were acquainted with her exceeding benevolence and amiability of nature.

"Rest your eyes on Ennis Denzell—



hey?" laughed the duke, walking away; the next instant he returned. "Look here, young ladies: it is my impression you will do more wisely to leave this stupid corner and come and join my daughters in the next room; it is fifty times more cheerful there."

"An excellent suggestion," cried merry little Monica, springing up and slipping her hand within his arm. "I am quite sure I shall infinitely prefer it—especially now you are leaving us," she added, in a low coquettish tone of pretended partiality.

The duke laughed.

"Now then, *ma belle*," offering his other arm to me.

I thanked him, but declined.

It was more than amusing enough for me, I said, and I could hear the beautiful music better.

"Oh, do not delay, Reggie," urged the duchess; "your friends knew I came to send you to them, and will wonder what has become of you"; and, with a comically lugubrious shake of his bald head at me, he and Monica went laughing away together.

I confess I should have liked accompanying Monica to the next room had I been certain that the Bells or Charles Beechley were there; but I felt doubtful, under existing circumstances, in what mood Frances might choose to receive me. If she wishes for my society, thought I, she can quickly and easily obtain it in her own house; but I will not go where she is, as though I were seeking her, and perhaps find myself *de trop*.

Meanwhile the duchess and Lady Dormer conversed together in such low, familiar tones that only an occasional broken sentence or a word reached my ear amidst the ceaseless hum and buzz of voices everywhere prevailing. The little I heard proved that the former had already made a confidante of the motherly, kind-hearted Lady Dormer concerning their great family affliction—poor Gurty.

“Injured my brain, I fear—never quite recover—is certainly dying, they tell me—poor, horrible little creature! Dr. Carlinez is of opinion that—. . . . The other morning—sudden surprise—fainted away—too revolting to be even pitiable!” and so on, and so on, were the disjointed remarks I could not avoid

hearing—a fact which they seemed not to mind. The duchess was unusually eager and talkative on this painful subject to-night—so much so that I was tempted during a short pause to ask how Lady Gurty was.

“Oh, very well; no, not well, I mean,” was the contradictory answer, and which was willingly left in its half-finished state upon Dora Bell’s just then entering the room and hastening towards me, followed by her sister and Charles Beechley.

“We thought you had not come,” she said, “and were much surprised when Monica told us you were sitting in here. But we want you to return with us to the other room. Lady Frances was saying she wished you to see an exquisite collection of dissolving views, just brought them by a friend from London, and the looking at which will occupy the time a little until the count commences his exhibition.”

I, of course, looked questioningly at my chaperon.

“Certainly, my love; go, by all means, if you wish it,” she answered. “Take care of her, Mr. Beechley.”

Charles bowed with gloomy gravity.

“ Oh, Ennis, would I were but half as beautiful as you are ! ” murmured Dora, in a sorrowful tone, as we proceeded to the great reception drawing-room. “ You look more lovely and lovable to-night than ever. What chance of success can poor ordinary mortals like ourselves have in your presence ? Those camellias are so becoming in your rich, glossy hair ! ”

I reddened and laughed as I glanced at Charles to note what effect my charms were making upon him. But I and all concerning me were evidently as far from his thoughts as the most commonplace person in the room ; and every sensation of vanity left my heart at sight of his woe-begone face. Pale and sad he had looked before, but this evening he was ghastly, and so absorbed in dark thoughts that I could see he scarcely remembered where or with whom he was. “ This must not go on,” I thought, and, knowing my power over him, resolved, at all risk of his misunderstanding my feelings, to use it in restoring his poor harassed mind to some degree of cheerfulness.

“ Now, Charley, what *are* you thinking of ? ” questioned I, putting my hand within his arm, and shaking and pressing it a little, as I smiled

up into his white, unhappy face. "I am quite sure by your look that my superlative beauty, which Dora was so generously extolling, formed no part of your meditations. Ah, no! such a bright subject could never belong to so dismal a physiognomy; I am certain of that," with another mischievous smile.

Little had I anticipated so sudden and violent a change. It was electrical. His whole being seemed to flash into life, like magic. A dusky red swept over his pallid features, leaving them some shades less white than before; his dreamy, mournful eyes glowed as if a fire had been ignited within, and was flaming through those mental portholes; and with a convulsive movement he pressed my hand and arm to his side, and there retained it.

I was almost frightened, and felt very much in the position of one who with daring temerity, but half aware of the power she trifles with, waves a fairy's wand, and is amazed and startled upon seeing a huge river arise where she meant but to call a sparkling stream into existence.

To avoid his disagreeably ardent glances, burning with re-awakened hopes I had not

intended, I turned to speak to Dora, and found, alas! that my unlucky use of the magic wand had indirectly exercised its potent effects upon her as powerfully as upon Charles, though of course with a totally different result.

She was gazing eagerly at him, her eyes and brow full of grief and jealousy, and her before pretty, blooming face white as my white camellia. We were now in the next room, and, stopping, I withdrew my hand from Charles, and taking Dora's, placed it on his arm instead, saying, gaily, "Dora, I lay your wits under an embargo not to allow this ungallant gentleman to relapse into his before inattentive, neglectful behaviour in our presence. Mind now, Dora; for I am going to bring Lady Fanny to show us the newly arrived pictures. Meanwhile you all go to the table; look! that must be it," indicating one on the right, a short distance in advance; and I then walked away to join Frances, who was standing, with Monica and three or four others, ladies and gentlemen, talking and laughing.

"I was just coming for you, Ennis," exclaimed the former, cordially, before I spoke, seeing, I dare say, I was a little uncomfortably

doubtful of my reception. "I am anxious to show you some beautiful views and amusing puzzles we have received. Oh, but first allow me to introduce Mr. Baskerville, who has been requesting an introduction to you."

Thereupon I and Mr. Baskerville (a rich widower, possessed of large landed property in Yorkshire) bowed with all due courtesy to each other, the gentleman coming immediately to my side.

He was a tall, thin, handsome, aristocratic-looking man, apparently between thirty and forty years of age, who spoke in a low-toned, hesitating manner, his arched eyebrows rising and falling with every word he uttered, with even his looks and thoughts. In all my experience I had never seen so singularly restless a pair of brows, or so expressive.

"I—think—you are fond of riding?" he asked, as we all followed Frances to the table containing the paintings, &c. "I have seen you—often on horseback, have I not?"

"I dare say you have sometimes; I delight in riding."

"But—not in hunting? I have not seen you—following the hounds, or even at a meet."

“No; I have never done either. The truth is,” I added, colouring hotly because of the seeming weakness of the confession, “although a country girl, I do not like hunting: any sport would lose all amusement for me—would become even distasteful—that owed its entertainment to the persecuting a poor animal to death; and that, you know, is hunting.”

He smiled down upon me a pleasant, amused, but flattering smile, half concealed by a thick, drooping moustache. It played conspicuously over his whole countenance, however, especially in and about his quiet blue eyes. His face was a fine one, with its long, high, thin-cut nose and broad but square forehead. I liked him much, as, in fact, every maiden did upon whom he cared to exercise his fascinations. Even his slow - speaking and long-drawn but not drawled words were decidedly winsome, though you could not have explained why.

“Well—I—I cannot undertake to say—wha-t—wha-t might be the tastes and fancies of—of the hare, under—under circumstances so trying as the being pursued by—by—forty or fifty relentless brutes—thirsting for its life-blood.” He spoke in a quizzing but not offensive tone.



“I hold strongly the opinion, however, and believe it is a pretty general one—that—that—the fox enjoys the sport of being chased quite as much as the dogs do the chasing him.”

“Oh, Mr. Baskerville! how could that be possible?”

Up mounted the eyebrows.

“Why, you see, it gives the rogue such first-rate opportunities of—of showing off his world-wide fame for craft, cunning, and agility—”

“And to this cunning you also add vanity, strong enough to make him enjoy risking his life to display his capabilities to the world,” I interposed, laughing.

“Something very like it—certainly,” he answered, laughing a little, and elevating his eyebrows.

We were now standing by the table; and looking up I encountered Charles Beechley’s eyes scowling fiercely at me and my knight. He was evidently again in a very unpleasant temper, and I could not help feeling glad that other companionship prevented my having his undivided attention. It was altogether fortunate, I thought; for poor, loving Dora would,

I knew, rather be afflicted with it in its blackest, surliest mood than not at all.

“Well, I wish her joy of the possession,” I mentally ejaculated, “and only hope she will keep such tight hold that no more of it may fall to my lot at present. He cannot be in safer, more faithful hands than hers, and that satisfies me.”

## CHAPTER IX.

COUNT D'ALTON.

A LARGE group were assembled round the picture table, and Frances proposed our all sitting down. The consequent movements brought me, contrary to my desire, next to Charles, Mr. Baskerville keeping close on my other side. This latter arrangement was very satisfactory to my girlish feelings, which were for the time altogether won by his refined gentleness, and a supporting, encouraging treatment of my simplicity and inexperience that wonderfully inspired me with self-possession and enjoyment of everything around us. Most of his early life had been spent in a regiment of Dragoon Guards, the which, upon the death of his father, and when he had attained to the rank of captain (an inferior military title he did not, of course, care to

retain), he quitted to live upon and look after the estates he had inherited.

“Fate is kinder to me than you are, Ennis. It was no choice of your own that placed you here,” murmured Charles, in so sad and dreary a tone it went at once to my heart.

“Oh, do not say that, Charley!” replied I, repentantly, and looking so, too, for the tears sprang to my eyes, as I raised them to his pale, cheerless face.

Again I had unwittingly waved the fairy wand. He changed as though at a word some evil spirit had sped from him, leaving his before-chained soul now free as air and as light. Speedily he became the life of the party, surprising and delighting all by his unequalled cleverness and humour. Under his influence, too, we all felt drawn out, and sometimes laughingly amazed at our own sharpness in lucky hits at enigmas, abstruse puzzles, and complicated charades, with which we amused ourselves after looking at the pictures. Charley’s gaiety when he thus condescended to shine, was of a style that never overpowered or oppressed even the gravest person; and, again, so charmed was Frances, and so demonstrative her admiration

of his abilities, that had not the hearts of both been already disposed of—alas for poor Dora Bell! When the ingenuity of the party was exhausted, and our intellects brought to a standstill before some difficulty, then, and then only, did Charles step in, and wittily and with unerring skill at once unravel the knotty point. No matter what the question, or in what language—English, French, or Italian—he opened it up with a clearness and an unhesitating facility that was really marvellous, enchanting the ladies and exciting the jealousy of many of the gentlemen. Yes, they were unmistakably chagrined that in this race of intellects one competitor—a man notoriously unpopular among friends and associates—should, apparently without an effort, while they strove heartily, distance them all, thus rendering himself the doubly envied focus for sparkling glances and admiring smiles.

For my part, the sisterly feeling I entertained for Charles Beechley always made me as proud of his successes of every kind as though he was really my brother; and my laughter and delighted praise were quite as warm as the others', and helped not a little, I

knew, to stimulate him to success. Even the ex-Dragoon's suavity was not proof against such sweeping rivalry, as became evidenced by a certain cynicism and coldness in his expression and remarks.

"Ah, ye-s—very good," he said to me, in a low tone of jealous contempt. "It is curious how really easy all these little puzzles are. I believe that—that—nine times out of ten—that *that* is the chief hindrance to their—their solution."

"Their being easy, do you mean?"

"Exactly. Upon the same principle, you see, as—as thinking a mark much farther than it is, and—and aiming far beyond it."

"I see," replied I, amused by his spirit of detraction.

The fun went on—difficulties increased, complex, and impossible of solution or answer, to the others, but bringing only additional laurels to Charles. He really excelled himself this evening, and astonished me, long acquainted though I had been with his peculiarities of character. His wit and achievements excited unbounded merriment and applause. Mr. Baskerville did not laugh, however, and seemed momentarily getting more impatient,

saying, in a quiet tone of increased but still politely suppressed sarcasm,—

“It is positively wonderful what a talent some people have for playing these little games” (these little games, some of them, embraced every species of knowledge—poetry, history, biography, &c.)—“people, too, sometimes—well, sometimes—rather, if not decidedly, slow on all other points.”

These were strong opinions; and, knowing Charley’s unhappy violence of temper, I glanced hurriedly before answering, to see whether he had overheard them. I did not quite think he had; but a gleam in his eyes and general expression made me doubtful on the subject. He was not angry, however; that was clear. On the contrary, particularly pleased, as though, if he *did* hear, Mr. Baskerville’s jealousy flattered and gratified him.

“That arrow falls far short of the mark,” rejoined I, in a low voice, smiling. “Charles Beechley carried off every prize, every honour, during his Oxford career, and is now one of the cleverest barristers on the circuit.”

I did not think at the instant of the direct implication of jealousy of Charles my answer

contained, and was a little annoyed to see a deep flush spread over Mr. Baskerville's face.

"Ah, indeed!" he replied, in a tone of utter indifference, elevating his eyebrows to a great height.

Our occupation and mirth brought the guests from all sides, and the large table was thronged by lookers and listeners, who keenly appreciated the matchless facility with which the young barrister extricated himself and others out of every difficulty. I have all through my life observed as a rule, with rarely an exception, that a witty, humorous cleverness in men is omnipotent in its power upon the female heart; good looks are weak in comparison. And now the bright shower of glances and smiles falling upon Charles declared him the principal object of attraction.

Had he always been thus during our past years of intimacy, had I been favoured with more of these fascinating sides of his disposition and character, and with much, much fewer of the gloomy and repellent, I might—nay, I am sure I should—have loved him. Ah! but how thankful I now feel that I did not!

Lady Elizabeth Bristow and—to my discom-



future, for I hoped he was gone—Mr. Desmond joined our party presently. It surprised me that they seemed considerably more friendly than they were before; and by his assiduous attentions the gentleman was evidently anxious to regain his lost place in her good graces. The Marquis of Belford had early quitted the room; and I have no remembrance of seeing him again that night. I was standing by Frances, previous to our first sitting down at the table, and, turning to speak to Mr. Baskerville, found the marquis close behind me. I conclude the proximity was accidental, for he started and turned pale as our eyes met. Then it was he left the room.

By-and-by Lady Hyacinth came to tell us that all was in readiness for the “Oriental exhibition,” which was about to commence immediately. Thereupon we all rose, full of excited expectancy; and while my Yorkshire cavalier, in his slow, polished fashion, was gracefully offering his arm, murmuring something about “may he have the honour,” &c., Charles, without speaking, unceremoniously took my hand, placed it on his arm, and walked

off with me. In the mood he was then in I did not venture to oppose him ; but I felt annoyed and angry at this arbitrary monopoly of myself, for, in the first place, I much preferred the society of Mr. Baskerville, and, in the next, I feared that the latter, not understanding the case—how could he?—would attribute my conduct to the want of a proper knowledge of the world, to rustic rudeness, in fact. I could not resist, therefore, as Charles stopped an instant to offer his other arm to Dora Bell, turning my head and bowing and smiling apologetically to my baffled knight, who returned both good-humouredly, and with a comic raising of his eyebrows that certainly was not flattering to the manners of the “clever barrister.”

The suite of drawing-rooms terminated with a spacious apartment that, in addition to the large centre folding-doors, possessed a smaller one at the extreme end. This opened into a magnificent corridor, adorned on either side, throughout its entire length, with statues, statuettes, and exquisite vases, while the walls were covered with fine and valuable paintings. On all great occasions the arched door conducting

into it was left open, the whole being brilliantly lighted; but to-night it had been kept shut for the convenience of Count d'Alton's arrangements.

Into this end room we followed Frances and Hyacinth. A dazzling blaze of light greeted us on our entrance, bringing out in strong relief the tall, handsome form of a man, dressed in black, bending over a table covered with a white cloth, standing on a temporarily raised platform close to the before-mentioned smaller door. Chairs of all kinds, placed in half-circles, and thus flowing up to the foot of the platform, filled the whole room, and to some of the latter, as best adapted for seeing, Frances hurriedly conducted us, the duke and duchess and Lady Hyacinth attending to the more honoured guests.

Charles was carelessly looking about the room as we advanced, taking no heed of the reputed magician; but upon approaching the platform, when his eyes unexpectedly rested on the silent figure before us, what a change came over him! Dora and I were frightened.

He started, and gazed with dilated eyes, convulsively shuddering, and pressing his arms

so tightly against his sides that my hand tingled for long after, drawing in his breath the while and uttering some indistinct exclamation that sounded full of amazement, doubt, and horror. Dora and I stared at him, forgetful of everything else. His face was beyond description dreadful, and his skin looked like that of a corpse.

“What is it, Charles?” gasped poor Dora.

“Oh, what is the matter with you?”

But he did not seem to hear her, continuing to move slowly forward with still, wild staring eyes at the stooping figure of the count.

“Dear Charley, are you ill?” I asked, in a trembling tone, beginning to feel icy cold with indefinable apprehension. “Do not stay here; let us come home at once. Oh, pray do, Charles!”

True to its old power, my voice recalled him to consciousness, and he stammered contradictorily,—

“What do you mean, Ennis? There’s nothing the matter with me. I am a little ill; that is all; I shall be well directly.” Then adding in low, excited words to himself, “It must be a mistake—a horrible mistake! What could

*he* have to do here? It is a delusion of my poor, wretchedly harassed brain! Perhaps it is—it is—madness! yes, madness!”

Fortunately, the attention of the company was so much engrossed by the form of the count, and in securing eligible seats for seeing the coming magic feats, that they heeded nought else, and we passed on unobserved to the places indicated by Lady Frances; these were the nearest to the platform.

Charles sat on my right; Frances on my left. She was unusually grave and thoughtful this evening, which just at present I was glad of, for my attention was so painfully fixed upon Charles that I could scarcely understand when spoken to.

He was now unpleasantly silent, but I heard his laboured breathing as he watched the tall, dark form opposite with a moveless steadfastness not unmingled with an expression of fierceness I trembled to see, not knowing what it resulted from or foreboded.

Presently a cessation of the general stir, and of the rustling of dresses, announced that the guests were seated; and now Count d'Alton stood erect, and deliberately turned and faced

the company. And yes, in his magnificently handsome countenance and figure I instantly recognized the original of that photograph which had so charmed us in one of the Castle albums. He was truly a splendidly good-looking man, the very impersonation of a beau ideal of all that could be god-like in a human being; such a man as that could never have injured Charles Beechley, I thought,—oh, it is impossible!—he could not, would not, harm a living thing; and yet—

He evidently purposed introducing proceedings by a humorous prologue. His fine intellectual features sparkled with his yet unspoken thoughts, as rapidly his eyes travelled over the multitude of upturned, expectant faces gazing at him. The next instant his look fell upon Charles, and with a spasmodic start of his whole frame, and a sudden change of expression to one of blank amazement, and even a sort of fear, there remained fixed. For a few seconds both men stared wildly at each other, then Charles sprang up speechless and ghastly, and dashing past Dora, past every one, people shrinking aside right and left to make way for him, rushed out of the room and the

house, for nowhere could he afterwards be found.

Dora Bell made an excited movement to follow him, but fainted, and would have fallen to the floor, had not a gentleman caught her in his arms and saved her.

The whole room was in direful confusion—a confusion all the greater because so unexpected, and, save to the count, so inexplicable. Mr. Bell hastened to the side of his insensible daughter, and at Lady Fanny's request carried her upstairs to the bedroom of the latter, she and Lucy and I accompanying her.

Poor Dora quickly recovered, but could not be persuaded to return to see the exhibition, entreating to be allowed to remain where she was until time to go home. In this arrangement I too begged to share, feeling in so shaken, sorrowful, and bewildered a state as to be totally unfit for society and amusement.

Frances very unwillingly agreed to my request; and when she presently left us, I followed her outside the door, and earnestly begged that she would, on the first favourable opportunity after the entertainment was over,

question the count concerning the strange scene we had just witnessed.

“I will,” she answered, warmly; “for you ought to know, and you shall.”

A sudden suspicion flushed my cheeks.

“Frances, you do not think that Charles Beechley and I are engaged—that we love each other?”

She looked earnestly at me without answering, and I continued,—

“Believe me, if you do, you were never more mistaken. We are not engaged, nor ever will be. I simply love him as an old and valued friend I have known since my babyhood—as I might a kind brother; nothing more.”

Frances coloured deeply, and an expression of angry surprise clouded her fair face.

“If that is really the case, Ennis,—if you are not engaged to Mr. Beechley, or in love with him, or—or any one else” (a slight pause, but I affected not to perceive it),—“then, what made you”—she spoke with increasing coldness—“I cannot resist asking, though, perhaps, I have no right—unhesitatingly refuse *both* my brothers? Frederick I can say no-



thing about, with your looks ; for of course you know—you cannot help knowing—you are very beautiful, very, very beautiful.” A ring of sadness and jealousy, for the first time, marred the usually pleasant tone of her voice and the expression of her face as she gazed at me. “You naturally expect far more in a husband than he, a younger son, would have it in his power to bestow upon you ; but Belford, my eldest brother ! why, the highest-born girl in the land, short of royalty, might glory in being his wife !”

I felt my eyes flash, and Frances dropped hers before them.

“If I could have loved either of your brothers, Lady Frances,” I replied, indignantly, “it would have been Lord Frederick.\* But why these unjust, inconsistent reproaches ?” I added, more gently ; “inconsistent because you know very well that, in your hearts, you and Lady Hyacinth are extremely *glad* I did not accept your eldest brother, mortified though your sisterly pride might be at my rejection of his suit—glad that he is still free”—and I smiled, half sarcastically, half amused—“to be won by some high-born damsel who will pro-

perly appreciate the honour and 'glory' of her position—which I, though only poor Ennis Denzell, should never have done. The truth is, neither the marquis nor Lord Riphon are men who could excite my love, or—excuse me for speaking so plainly, dear Frances—or my esteem; and I absolutely require those two united feelings to tempt me to risk my life-long happiness in marriage.”

Again Frances coloured; but this time she looked hurt, rather than offended. Putting my arm round her, and laying my cheek against hers, I murmured, “Yes; even though my choice fell on one far, far inferior to either of your brothers. And, Frances,” I added, in a whisper, for I had lately, as I said, had strong suspicions of Lady Fanny’s secret, “does not *your* heart also respond to these sentiments?”

“Yes, it does.” The answer came with an unhesitating firmness and earnestness that seemed irrepressible. She then hurried away, saying, “Directly I have learned anything, dear, I will run up and tell you.”

Mr. Bell and Lucy soon returned to the gay scene below, and Dora and I sat in Lady Fanny’s luxuriously appointed bed-room, and

talked and marvelled over the strange scene we had just witnessed in the exhibition-room.

That it was nearly connected with the great and painful secret of his past life we were both convinced, and our hearts throbbed with as much of dread as of curiosity at thought of the now possible opening up of a mystery that for more than seven long years had lain locked in impenetrable darkness.

## CHAPTER X.

## THE MYSTERY CLEARED UP AT LAST.

As time advanced, so great became poor Dora Bell's agitation that under its painful influence she confessed to me that so dearly—perhaps madly—did she love Charles Beechley that, be his folly (his *crime*, possibly: who could say yet?) what it might, she should but love him the more warmly—yes, the more strongly—the worse it was, and the more earnestly desire to devote her life to tending, soothing, and cheering him to the utmost of her power, and thus to bring back his lost happiness.

Poor, faithful girl! I thought it incumbent upon me to warn her, in her confiding blindness, of some of the danger in her path.

“Do not mistake his character and disposition, Dora,” said I, earnestly; “he is sc

strangely inconsistent and contradictory. Weighed down with sorrow, as he undoubtedly is and has been for such a long time, it is nevertheless a fact that not a sensation of penitence or of remorse does he feel for his past conduct, though he knows that by his cruel heartlessness he occasioned the premature death of his gentle, amiable mother."

Dora looked exceedingly distressed, but not a bit less resolved to sacrifice herself, if possible, for the selfish Charles Beechley. I sat silently looking at her down-bent face, as she nervously twisted and untwisted her pocket-handkerchief. Presently she said, in a low voice,—

"But he never speaks of his feelings, Ennis; how can any one tell what they are? Charles is the last person in the world who would talk about himself on any point. But, perhaps—oh, when I say that, I don't know!" she added, a pained expression, as of a spasm, passing over her kind features—"he might not care to talk on such subjects to *me*; but to you he—"

"Nor has he ever voluntarily favoured me," I interrupted, carelessly; "but I know he declared to grandmamma that so far from considering himself in fault, or regretting any-

thing he had done, he regarded his conduct as spotlessly free from wrong as is new-fallen snow from taint or stain; and, were the same circumstances to demand it, he would, without hesitation, act in the same way again; and this he said likewise to his father and to Sariann."

"And oh! Ennis, knowing Charles as we do, is not that assertion proof positive of his innocence?" pleaded the love-blind girl. "We know he is truth itself, do we not?"

I replied evasively, not wishing to vex her further. We sat silent a short time. Presently Dora said,—

"Oh, suppose, Ennis, that Count d'Alton should, from motives of honour or kindness, refuse to tell what he knows?" smiling mournfully through her tears as she spoke.

"I never thought of that!" exclaimed I; "and, judging from his style, he is just the sort of man to do so. Oh, how aggravating that would be! Why, the secret would be ten times more complicated than ever—more distressing and more exciting. But I trust he will not be so unnecessarily reticent; it would be such a disappointment, would it not, dear?"

“Ye-s!” replied Dora, looking relieved rather than annoyed, however.

“Oh, Dora, how can you be so indifferent!” I said. “Don’t you see that the mystery is doubled since the count has come on the scene? Who can stand that? Not I, certainly; and no stone will I now leave unturned till I have reached the bottom, and the truth lying there.”

“Oh, I do not know, Ennis,” objected poor timid Dora, in a frightened tone. “I declare I think I prefer *not* knowing. In this case—such a strange, unnatural one, as it seems—I cannot help feeling the truth of the old saying, ‘Where ignorance is bliss, ’tis folly to be wise.’”

“But do you not see, dear,” I too objected, “that if Charles is the honourable man every one believes him to be, and as he most undoubtedly considers himself, he will not, of course, *marry* with that Bluebeard’s chamber locked up in his house? What does he propose doing, then? for I am certain he intends, sooner or later, taking to himself a wife.” And silently I wondered how he and his matrimonial conscience had decided to settle that

matter between them, if I had accepted him as a husband.

Dora did not answer for some seconds; then said, the colour mounting to her pale cheeks the while,—

“I think so highly of Charles Beechley—despite everything—think him so just and honourable, that even were he to carry his secret into his married life, my good opinion of him would still remain unchanged, for I should feel convinced some cause over which he had no control impelled his doing so. Oh, but what matters it what *I* think?” she added, suddenly, and speaking in a sad and bitter accent; “he does not love me; he never has, and never will. He loves *you*, Ennis, loves you with his whole heart and soul! And what wonder? with you always before his eyes how *could* he, how *can* he, love any other girl?—it would be impossible, utterly impossible!”

“But I do not love him,” I rejoined; “he knows I do not,—I told him so.”

She was silent a minute. “You are so young at present; you may feel quite differently by-and-by. You can hardly know your own mind yet; and—”



“I am not so particularly young, Dora,” I interposed, annoyed, as usual, at this imputation of unreflecting juvenility; “not by any means too young not to be well certain who I *can* and who I *cannot* love.”

She changed colour and looked fixedly at me, a very anxious expression mingling with one of hopefulness in her gentle face.

“Not either of the Riversdales, dear Ennis?” she questioned; “the marquis or Lord Rippon?”

“I did not say I loved any one,” replied I, laughing and reddening.

“Oh, then, if your heart is free you will be sure to get to love Charles in time,” rejoined Dora, with returning mournfulness; “you will learn to understand and esteem his character, and—”

“According to my present feelings, that would require a far longer period than I have half patience enough to wait for,” said I. “No, my heart is *not* free.” I blushed furiously, adding, firmly, “To set your mind at rest, dear, now and for ever, as regards Charles and myself, I will tell you a secret I have told no one else but Sariann, and, of course, grand-

mamma. Yes, I do love some one ; we have loved each other, I think, all our lives ; and next summer—in the autumn—we are—God willing—we are to be—married.”

Dora drew a long breath. “ Dear Ennis ! thank you for telling me ! thank you—thank you ! ” And, jumping up, her face radiant, she sat down beside me, and clasped me in her white arms, kissing my cheek, and murmuring,—

“ I know now who it is. Yes, yes, that will do. You will be safe with him. We shall all like that ; he is just suited to you—age, rank, good qualities, everything ! Oh, I am so glad ! And what a dear, kind, charming mother-in-law ! ”

Two hours dragged slowly on, during which Mr. Bell came up once to see how his daughter fared ; and a couple of maid-servants brought us refreshments. How long the time seemed ! I half regretted, as my agitation subsided, having so altogether retired from the amusements delighting every one below.

At last Frances, looking flushed, grave, and thoughtful, made her welcome appearance.

“They were all on the move to the supper-room,” she said, coming forward and slowly seating herself; “and then I took advantage of the opportunity to secure a few minutes’ private conversation with—with Count d’Alton.”

“Oh! you have spoken to him? I am so glad! And what *did* he say?” cried I, excitedly.

Frances was silent, gazing thoughtfully into my face.

“But for the confession you made me before I went downstairs,” she resumed, presently, “I should not have the courage to tell you, dear Ennis, that which I now know of Mr. Beechley.”

My cheeks grew cold at these fearful words, as if an east wind was passing over them; and poor Dora, who was pale enough before, grew quite ghastly. She remained rigidly still, however, staring at Frances, who was fortunately too preoccupied to observe her.

“Have you never thought, never even surmised, what the secret is he has been so wildly anxious to conceal from you and from all the world for the past seven years and more?” Frances went on, nervously.

"We have not the faintest idea, nor ever have had," I answered. "Oh, Frances! what is it?"

"Madness—incurable, hereditary madness! Those three years, during which he so entirely and mysteriously disappeared, as it were, off the face of the earth, were spent in a madhouse in France."

"A madhouse? impossible!" I gasped. Oh, Frances, there must be some terrible mistake! Charles a madman?"

"You shall judge for yourself whether there can be any mistake," she replied, gently. "The *hospice d'aliénés* he was in was the one I have told you about, situated near Paris, where Gurty was placed, belonging to the celebrated Dr. Carlinez. Count d'Alton is—or rather was—Dr. Carlinez."

"Dr. Carlinez!" I repeated, almost speechless with astonishment; "that magnificently handsome, regal-looking man the doctor of a madhouse! No wonder, indeed,"—happily I stopped in time: I was actually on the point of blurting out, "no wonder you fell in love with such a princely personage!"

What part of my speech disconcerted

Frances I know not; but she blushed painfully, saying,—

“Yes, that was Dr. Carlinez. He belongs to an exceedingly good old French family, the d’Altons, who, in common with so many of the French *noblesse*, were ruined during the Revolution. His father, Count d’Alton, lately died, and Dr. Carlinez—Carlinez is the family name—inherits the title, and such property as they managed afterwards to recover from the general wreck.”

“Oh, Lady Frances!” interposed Dora, speaking in a trembling, distressed voice, and too absorbed by the one overwhelming thought to bear the distraction of any other. “Please tell us about him—about Charles Beechley, I mean. How did he get into that dreadful madhouse? Who put him there? Poor Charles! oh, poor Charles!”

Thus summarily stopped on the agreeable topic of her own lover, Lady Fanny looked with sudden earnestness at Dora, and a smile flickered round her mouth and in her eyes, showing she understood and, sympathetically, excused the interruption.

“Well,” she continued, turning to me, “after

what I have told you, Ennis, you must see there can be no mistake. Why, Mr. Beechley's own conduct, upon his recognition of the count, is sufficient proof of itself."

"Yes, it certainly is," replied I, sadly. "Poor Charles! no wonder he strove so earnestly to hide such a frightful affliction from the world; for, of all dreadful, dreadful things which every human being fears and shuns, madness is the worst."

"Oh, but, Ennis, Charles is not mad *now*," pleaded the faithful Dora; "he is as sane as any one, and has been so, you know, ever since his return to England."

I felt very strong doubts on the last point, but of course did not express them. It was clear to me that, for some secret reason, this revelation, that excited such horror in my mind, had brought immense relief to hers, brightening her soft eyes, and tinging her cheeks with a faint return of colour.

"I will tell you all about it," rejoined Frances, looking kindly and compassionately at Dora. "You are, I know, both the sincere friends of his family and himself; and the knowledge will, as regards his interests, be safe

in your hands. I will take some more convenient opportunity to enter minutely into details should you wish it, but now must make the story as brief as possible. Between four and five years ago we were staying in Paris. Dr. Carlinez was attending Gurty. You remember," turning to me, "I told you we were very anxious he should exercise his great psychological skill to improve, if possible, her strangely defective intellect?"

"I remember."

"Well, one morning, while sitting alone with him in the drawing-room, waiting for mamma to come down, I noticed that he looked particularly grave, and was silent and depressed. Presently, without being questioned, he said,—

"‘A circumstance has just occurred which, independent of other reasons, is in itself of so distressing a nature that the painful feelings it caused my mind at the time are still strong within me.’"

"Yes," I interposed, warmly, "I should quite think that, or anything else good, of Count d'Alton: he is the noblest-looking man I ever saw."

Frances blushed, and her eyes sparkled ; but, without trusting her voice to answer, she continued,—

“ Three years previously, the count said, a gentleman came late one evening to his establishment for the insane. He was a tall, very young man, of a fine intellectual countenance and with remarkably pleasing manners. Directly the doctor looked at him, however, he saw that the brain was in a highly excited state ; nevertheless he was hardly prepared for the singular request made by his visitor—nothing less than that he (Dr. Carlinez) would receive him into his asylum, and attend him professionally, for he felt he was rapidly going mad. He had had fearful presentiments, during the past month, that it was coming on, and now,—now, he was horribly *certain*. At this point he laid a packet of bank-notes on the table, saying, in so dreary and hopelessly sad a voice, and with so wretched an expression of face, that the recollection haunted him, the count added, the whole night, waking or sleeping,—

“ ‘ If by the time this sum is expended I am still a madman, may God in mercy grant that ere another week has passed I shall be lying in



my grave! Will you receive me, doctor,' he asked, in wild agony, 'as I am — nameless, friendless? If you refuse, I will, of course, instantly leave your house, and—and—may God have mercy upon me, for I shall have none for myself!'

"He turned, and walked in an agitated manner up and down the room.

"His mind was in a perfectly sane state then, Dr. Carlinez said; but the signs were unmistakable, to his experienced eye, that the poor young man's assertion was only too correct; as the count expressed it, 'Madness had already opened the door of his brain, and was on the eve of entering.'

"The doctor had no intention, he assured him, of refusing his request; he was welcome to remain in the establishment as long as he needed professional care, and kindly and soothingly he promised that every means that medical skill suggested should be employed in restoring his mind to its former healthy tone, and again fitting him for a return to his friends and to worldly duties."

"Oh, how kind of him!" I exclaimed,

scarcely able to speak for crying; “how benevolent! how generous!”

Frances was silent for a few seconds, then resumed:—

“The gentleman stopped suddenly on hearing these words, and with brightening face held out his trembling hand, saying, falteringly,—

“ ‘Thank you, Dr. Carlinez—God bless you—God for ever bless you! Shake hands to-night; to-morrow it may be the grasp of a maniac!’

“It was like that then, Dr. Carlinez told me, and made his fingers tingle for hours afterwards.

“The two drank tea together—Mr. Wilmot (by that name he said he wished to be called) eating ravenously; not a morsel of food had passed his lips for nearly three days, he said.

“During much conversation that followed, and in which Mr. Wilmot displayed wonderful intellectual power and knowledge, the count endeavoured guardedly to obtain some insight into his antecedents; but, beyond a confession that he had overworked his brain by hard and ceaseless study, he acknowledged nothing—not

even where, or for what motive of ambition, the evil had been wrought. No; nor during the months and years of mental darkness that soon closed upon him did he make any allusion to the past that could throw the faintest light upon his former life. All seemed utterly forgotten by him as though it had never been. Such total oblivion is, Dr. Carlinez said, of general occurrence among the insane.

“His madness, too, was of a very variable, capricious kind,—sometimes violent, even murderous, at other times silent, brooding, and melancholy, this often increasing to suicidal tendency, requiring careful watching and restraint.

“To effect this properly it was necessary to employ two keepers; but to one of these, a fresh-coloured, good-humoured looking young man, the patient conceived an unaccountable antipathy—an abhorrence, in fact, of so determined a nature that Dr. Carlinez, in a little while, changed him for another.”

I thought of the strange dislike Charles had shown to poor inoffensive William Dawkins, and silently wondered whether the keeper resembled him.

“During the latter part of the three years,” continued Frances, “Mr. Wilmot’s insanity lost all fierceness and variableness of character, and settled down into a mood of unchanging, abstracted melancholy. This lasted until the beginning of the two final months of his stay in the madhouse. For some weeks previously, however, the doctor’s skilful eye detected an increasing improvement in his mental condition, notwithstanding his silence and depression. One day, as Dr. Carlinez had expected, the cloud lifted, and his before-darkened brain was once more open to the blessed light and guidance of reason. A month after this happy occurrence, Count d’Alton, who throughout had felt the keenest interest in the poor, friendless young patient, urged his return to his family and friends, who must be sorrowing over his mysterious disappearance. But, though perfectly recovered, he shrank from the thought of yet quitting his noble, kind, generous benefactor, and so earnestly petitioned to be allowed to continue an inmate of the establishment for a short time longer that the count could not bear to refuse, and thus another and the last month passed.

“Mr. Wilmot and the doctor were now constant companions, riding, driving, and walking together. One evening they strolled a considerable distance along the banks of the beautiful Loire into a remote and solitary part of the country. Tired, for the weather was hot and sultry, they sat down to rest on a high bank beside the river. For some time they were silent, gazing into the sparkling tide rushing by; then Mr. Wilmot said in a low voice, still looking upon the deep waters,—

“‘Dr. Carlinez, you possess a soul as noble, as godlike, as your form: who can know that better than I? Anything you say I believe as implicitly as I should words spoken from heaven. Now, I entreat you to answer this question—to answer it unreservedly—without any, the slightest, endeavour to soften down the rugged truth.’ He stopped an instant, growing deadly white, and drawing his breath hard. Presently, with restored composure, he continued, ‘Do you consider me thoroughly, permanently cured; or shall I always remain liable to—to attacks of my brain similar to those of the last three years?’

“He spoke, the count told me, so calmly

and firmly, so perfectly free was he from agitation or excitement in voice or manner, that, despite the experience of years which had taught him how little dependence can be placed on such appearances (professionally speaking), Dr. Carlinez was completely deceived upon young Mr. Wilmot again earnestly saying,—

“ ‘Do not fear to tell me, doctor; believe me it will be safest and best in every way that the true state of my case should be correctly known by me, before re-encountering the world and all its troubles and trials.’

“ ‘Well, yes, my dear Wilmot, I agree with you it *will* be best to quite understand the necessity you will always be under, for the future, of living as quiet, temperate, and unexcitable a life as possible. If you carry out this system sensibly, perseveringly, you *may* never have another attack.’

“ ‘In truth, then,’ interrupted Mr. Wilmot, rather jocosely than otherwise, ‘my horrible foe has simply been subdued, not destroyed—lulled into a sleep only, from which he might be aroused into full rampant wakefulness any day? Is not that the dark side of the case,

my good kind doctor? Simply say yes or no—nothing more.’

“ ‘Well—yes—that is the dark side, certainly,’ replied Dr. Carlinez, hesitatingly, not quite satisfied with the tone of his latter words.

“ ‘Thank you, Dr. Carlinez,’ answered the poor patient, a sudden change coming over him that painfully startled the count. ‘Yes, it is best for me to know the truth, the dreadful, irresistible truth, that life is not worth caring for, worth keeping on such torturing terms. It would be a living death!—a burden too heavy for me to bear! Good-bye, kind, noble friend. God for ever bless and reward you!’ and with a spring and a bound he hurled himself into the deep rapid waters of the Loire, before the other could lift a hand to stay him.”

“Oh, how dreadful!” Dora and I gasped out. Little had either of us expected so fearful a termination.

“The count could not swim, and was powerless, therefore, to save him,” resumed Frances; “no human being was within sight or sound. But once only the body rose to the surface for

a second or two, then was swept round an abrupt curve in the river, and the count saw him no more until to-night he turned to find his, as he had firmly believed, drowned patient of more than seven years before, standing within a few feet of him; and that patient is—Mr. Charles Beechley.”

“How extraordinary! how strange!” murmured poor Dora, who throughout the whole recital had been crying woefully to herself, “the grave, quiet, clever, rational Charles Beechley a madman!”

“And I suppose Dr. Carlinez has no idea how he was saved?” I asked.

“None. Soon as assistance could be procured, the river was searched and dragged for miles. A strong under-current prevailed in some parts, and it was supposed the body had been carried beyond reach of recovery. A cap he wore at the time of self-destruction was found floating on the waters far away—nothing more.”

A short silence ensued, which was broken by Frances saying,—

“I have now told you all. The story I have just narrated had quite passed from my



remembrance, until this evening recalled to it by Count d'Alton, when speaking to him as you requested. You may imagine my astonishment and distress upon hearing that the intended suicide, Mr. Wilmot, and our delightfully agreeable acquaintance, Mr. Beechley, are one and the same person!"

"Astonished? I should think you were!" exclaimed I. "Poor Charley! and now, then, we know his unhappy, long-hidden secret!" I added, with a sad, self-guilty feeling in my heart that we had done something by him we had no right to do—a something both treacherous and unkind. "Perhaps he may never go mad again—perhaps not"; but the recollection of divers peculiarities in his temper and disposition made me express this opinion very doubtfully,—certain expressions in his eyes, too.

"The count was amazed when I told him that no one knew Mr. Beechley had ever been out of his mind," observed Frances. "I said I did not believe that even a suspicion of unsoundness of intellect was felt concerning him; nor do I think there is."

"I have not heard of any hereditary mad-

ness in the family on either side; have you, Dora?" I asked.

Dora reddened painfully.

"Ye-s. I—I have heard there is, on the father's side; but whether the report is true I cannot tell. Report I call it; but it was not that, and I am the only member of my family who ever heard it. I was told by a friend some years ago, after Charles Beechley's return—but—but I did not repeat it even to Lucy."

## CHAPTER XI.

## ENNIS IS INTRODUCED TO THE COUNT.

As Dora was (singularly enough I thought) considerably happier since the clearing up of the mystery, I left her, at her request, and accompanied Frances to the supper-room. She, too, would have come, but crying had so much disfigured her gentle face it was wholly unfit to appear again that night in public.

My principal inducement for going down was to be introduced to Dr. Carlinez, or rather Count d'Alton. I wished much to ask him a few questions concerning Charles, touching his present and future state of health, and particularly to beg him to keep his poor secret from the world, and use his influence to induce others to do so.

“ That is exactly the request his kind nature

prompted his making to me," rejoined Frances, upon hearing my intention as we descended the stairs together. "His own family ought to know it, he said; and, if he married, his wife also,—that is, she ought to be told the truth before marriage."

The supper-room was fast emptying as we came in. The count was still there. He stood in the distance, distinguishedly tall and noble, surrounded by a little crowd of gentlemen and ladies. Upon seeing Lady Frances, he instantly left his party and joined her.

"How like a prince among subjects he looks!" I had murmured. She merely smiled in answer, but her blue eyes sparkled, and her whole countenance beamed with love and admiration.

Upon being introduced I was at once struck by the keen, powerful expression of his eyes and features generally, as he scrutinized mine. Disconcerted though I felt, I could not repress a smile as the involuntary thought possessed my mind how instinctively he brought his professional observation to bear upon every fresh face he became acquainted with.

"I wonder whether he detects any signs of

hereditary insanity in my great stupid eyes!" was my mental query.

"No," was the amused answer to my unspoken thought as he bent and looked into my face. "All perfectly sound in heart and soul."

I was astonished and ashamed, but burst into a fit of laughter.

"Will you not sit down?" said Frances, in so pained a voice that, while instantly obeying the suggestion, I glanced at her curiously. Poor silly Fanny! her before bright face was now very pale and miserable, and at once recalled Sariann and Captain Bell to my remembrance.

"How curiously jealous some people seem to become directly they are in love!" thought I. "Their natures must differ materially from mine, I am sure, for I never feel jealous about Harry—never." I resolved, however, that no further word or deed on my part should make her kind face look like that again.

"I think, little woman, you had better be seated also," murmured Count d'Alton, in an affectionate but decided tone, that plainly declared he understood the change in her

manner, and considered the feeling it betrayed both unjust and foolish.

She instantly placed herself beside me, and her handsome lover, having attended to our physical refreshment, sat down on the other side of Frances.

“Little woman!” I repeated, within myself. “Matters must indeed have gone far—gone beyond recall—to have arrived at that climax of familiarity. And instead of being displeased, it is quite evident to me that every word the count addresses to her in those fond but commanding tones peculiar to him, and bespeaking a glad, secure sense of proprietorship, is delightful to Lady Frances.”

How extraordinary that this at heart proud, this high-born, high-bred maiden should desire no greater or more exalted happiness on earth than being the submissive wife of the doctor of a madhouse! was my perplexed reflection, as I quietly ate my jelly and cake. Poor Frances! how will it all end? Her haughty family, will they ever consent? will they ever get over such an alliance, or rather misalliance?

She was troubling her head but little on

those momentous questions at present, for her cheeks and eyes had more than recovered their wonted brilliancy when she turned and said kindly,—

“Ennis dear, you wish to ask Count d’Alton a few questions regarding Mr. Beechley, and I do not think you could have a more favourable opportunity than the present.”

Frances was right, for, with the exception of a few distant lingerers at the supper-table, and a sociable group scattered here and there over the great room laughing and chatting together with unrestrained mirthfulness, the guests had returned to the drawing-room.

Thereupon I made divers inquiries concerning him, past and present. Did the count think he was quite cured? As overworking his brain was the origin of the mischief, was it not more than probable that care would decidedly prevent any return of madness?

Count d’Alton shook his head thoughtfully. “Overworking the brain was not the origin of the evil,” he said. “There must be madness in the family, on one side or other. A merely strained intellect would have recovered tone in half the time he was under my

care. By extreme temperance in diet and living in every way it would not be impossible, perhaps, to keep the brain in so calm, cool, and healthy a condition as to enable it to resist a second attack. But was Charles Beechley the style of man to make the large and continual amount of sacrifice necessary, imperatively necessary, to that end?" The count feared not.

"Poor Charley!" I murmured. "Oh, how grieved I should be if he were to go out of his mind again!"

My eyes filled with tears at the thought of so dreadful a calamity; and I looked up to find Count d'Alton gazing at me, his fine features full of a compassionate pity and surprise. Not being aware of my long intimacy and sisterly feeling for Charles, he evidently misunderstood the affectionate sorrow and interest I displayed, and believed I was in love, if not engaged to be married to him.

"Ah, Monsieur le Comte," thought I, "clever though your physiognomical powers may be, they fail you when brought to bear upon a girl's heart,—that is clear."

Of course I reddened under such a suspicion,



and the Frenchman politely bent his eyes upon the table and remained silent. I was quite glad when Frances said to me, lowering her voice,—

“Well, she knows the truth, the whole truth, already; and if she still ventures, it will be with her eyes wide open; but I should hardly think she would.”

Count d’Alton looked up quickly, an expression of satisfaction in his face.

“I thought *you* were the lady; and so young as you are—a mere child, in fact! But I trust the right person is more—more suited to him in every way. Do you know her age?”

“She is quite pretty,” I answered, “and between three and four and twenty. But Fanny and I have settled the matter rather too quickly,” I added, smiling. “We do not know that they are engaged yet; we—”

“Well, at least we are under no mistake as regards her feelings for the gentleman,” Frances interposed. “That was the young lady who fainted when poor Mr. Beechley rushed out of the room. Did you not see her, Berto—count?” corrected Fanny, hurriedly, and in much confusion.

“No; I only noticed that some person had fainted, and was being carried from the room; but as I happened at that moment to be in a more bewildered, excited state than ever in my life before, it did not surprise me, nor even attract my attention, the lady being a stranger to me. Three or four and twenty,” he added, thoughtfully; “oh, that will do. If a sensible girl, she ought to be able to judge for herself at that age; do you not think so?” This latter was addressed in a very low tone to Frances, bending towards her as he spoke.

“Yes,” she murmured, stooping over her plate to avoid his eyes.

And now a subdued conversation ensued between the lovers, who became rapidly oblivious to the whole world but themselves. After a while, perceiving Mr. Baskerville’s tall figure approaching from the other end of the room, I deemed it advisable to recall the spell-bound maiden to a recollection of the unromantic realities of life.

“Frances dear, Mr. Baskerville is coming this way, and before we all return to the drawing-rooms I want to beg a favour of Count d’Alton,—that you will,” I added, turning to

him, "come and see my grandmamma. It will, I know, afford her extreme pleasure to make acquaintance with one who has shown such kindness to her greatest of favourites, next to myself, Charles Beechley. Will you bring the count, Frances, and introduce him? Come in time for luncheon, and afterwards, while they are talking together, you and I can have a cosy little chat, which, through one obstacle or another, we have not enjoyed for a long time."

"Oh, yes, I shall be delighted," Frances said, looking only half conscious of what I proposed, however.

The count bowed and smiled, and readily promised he would, nothing preventing, do himself the honour, &c. There was no mistaking his quick appreciation of all the advantages it contained.

"When you are disposed to brighten the drawing-rooms with your presence again, Miss—Denzell, I shall be very happy to—to escort you," said quiet Mr. Baskerville, seating himself beside me.

I thanked him, but did not feel willing to go unaccompanied by Frances. I shrank from

the thought of Monica's laughing and quizzing and my future mother-in-law's wondering look; for I knew they were both under the full impression I was mournfully domiciled upstairs with Dora Bell. I had a strong suspicion, too, that Lady Fanny was taking advantage of my presence to enjoy an unobservable intercourse with her handsome lover, and would be extremely disconcerted if I left her.

Turning to Frances, I said, gravely,—“ You are not ready to return to the drawing-rooms yet, are you? You have not finished your supper?” (this latter with a very dubious look at the grapes and cake before her, whose demolition, at the present rate of proceeding, bade fair to be completed by morning).

“ No-o—not quite,” replied Frances, reddening, and looking down on her slowly vanishing dainties.

—“ Oh, no, I see; of course you have not,” I responded, with all a girl's ready sympathy and unreflecting anxiety to aid and forward, her wishes—wise or unwise—in any way I could. Thereupon I commenced an engrossing conversation with the ex-dragoon, which, begun in Fanny's service, quickly merged into

one of interest for myself. He had travelled a good deal on the Continent, and, telling him of my intended tour next summer, I amused myself in gleaning all the information I could concerning those parts we purposed visiting.

And so we talked and ate; for, at Mr. Baskerville's suggestion, I, nothing loth, commenced afresh on grapes and plum cake; in fact, we sat out the last, lingering guest, and I began to feel very tired and to wish for a change. Not so my cavalier; he had subsided into an easy state of perfect contentment, and made no further allusion to going back to the sitting-rooms.

Frances did it most effectually, however; for now, awakening to a consciousness of the position of affairs, she rose suddenly, declaring in a hurried, confused manner *she* was quite ready, and would *I* like to come into the drawing-rooms? I must tell you that, ready though she was, the cake and grapes still lay on her plate in pretty much as good condition as at first. Of course I gladly agreed; and as the dragoon and I stood up, the covert smile in his face and the amused elevation of the eyebrows, as his quiet glance took in Count d'Alton's

and Lady Fanny's flushed, preoccupied countenances, told me at once how wide awake he had been to the fact of the game Cupid was so noiselessly playing on my right hand.

Just then Monica ran into the room. She had been upstairs, she said, to look for me; they were going home; her mamma was now putting on her things in the cloak-room.

Soon after I was on my way to the dear old Court, but carrying back a heart far less light and joyous than I had brought in the early evening. Now all excitement was over I sorrowed at thought of poor, afflicted Charles, and that I should so soon be deprived of Lady Fanny, for whom I had conceived a warm friendship, and who would, I felt certain, soon leave Riversdale, never, perhaps, to return.

And Sariann and the good old rector! Time had, as yet, but partially healed their bygone afflictions; and must they now be wrenched open by the frightful knowledge that their clever, admired brother and son had been for three long years the inmate of a lunatic asylum, and that any day, any hour, he might become so again?

## CHAPTER XII.

EXTRACTS FROM SARIANN'S DIARY.

POOR little Gurty!—patient, gentle-hearted little Gurty! Ah, what a magic power have a sweet temper and a loving nature to beautify the most uncomely presence and to win human love! Never before have I seen its effects so wondrously manifested as in the case of this poor, misshapen child. At the first sight and sound of her face and voice I inwardly shrank with fear and horror, yea—God forgive me the sinful feeling!—with a sickening loathing and disgust. But now all that hath utterly passed away, nay, more than passed away,—hath changed to liking, and to a tender compassion and an all-absorbing desire to make ready the beauteous soul within that lamentable form for its rapidly approaching change.

Yes, better than they all understand I these mournful death-tokens—that departing of the spirit to the happy land ! Already—I see it well—already pale Consumption has laid her withering hand on the young girl's head, and with chill, relentless, albeit invisible power is pressing her down—down into the grave. But that which doth sorrow me most is that the spirit of this strange compound shape is leaving its mortal tenement to enter another world, as all unknowing, as unthinking of where and to whom it is speeding as though but a poor, gentle dog were going to his last rest. This it is grieves my heart to the core, and so often sends me in the early morning to the Castle—that being the period my dear father can best spare me—to the poor, unloved thing, shut up in her prison-rooms. Howbeit they truly can do no better for one so direfully afflicted.

She saith little—nay, oft-times she saith naught ; but I see that my presence doth now wondrously cheer her naturally dejected soul. When first, and by degrees, I talked to her of the great God—of the merciful Saviour who had died for her and for all mankind—of another world after this, glorious and beautiful



exceedingly, and full of joy and peace, such as neither she nor any human being could conceive of, prepared for all those who love and wait for the Lord Almighty—the poor benighted thing would gaze at me, speechless, with little wondering eyes, solemn, grave, and very mournful, after her peculiar look and fashion. Whether she comprehends aught that I say, whether she ever will, I know not. Howbeit one thing is certain, she begins to love to hearken unto my words; for when I cease speaking she looks wistfully, and says, “Oh, that is sweet, sweet music! Gurty likes it. Go on—go on.”

I have a strange thing to write of to-night.

This morning I sat me again with Lady Gurty. I had not been to the Castle for some days, and plainly I saw, and with sorrowing eyes, that the poor child had grown many degrees thinner and weaker, and her lamentable face more mournful looking, than when last I was with her.

We sat alone, she and I, in the recess-window, where of yore the gentle, harmless creature loved to delight herself with her drawing and

other little pleasures. But now—ah, how painful to my heart are those well-remembered death-signs!—now, when she betakes herself to them, a listless indifference creeps over her, and she lays down the unused pencil, and sometimes (so says Prosser) she drops asleep, or she wanders in restless, weary mood to and fro the rooms.

Well, as said I, we sat alone, reading a chapter in the Holy Book—that is to say, Gurty read, I expounding the meaning thereof. Nurse Prosser, needing divers necessaries for her “little lady,” so the kind woman always calls her nurseling, had gladly taken advantage of my presence to go downstairs to procure them, but enjoining me to lock the door as usual directly she was gone.

Now, my thoughts and feelings being all absorbed in other matters, I, for the first time, forgot this same serious injunction. The hitherto unbroken peacefulness of my many visits, too, had made me careless, even forgetful of danger, and inclined to think that, in so great and grand a place as the Duke of Riversdale's Castle, an unsanctioned intrusion into any of its forbidden precincts would be regarded by

guests and servants as little better than sacrilege.

Well, as I said, we sat, the child and I, wrapped in our holy subject, and when after awhile the door opened softly I but believed it to be the return of the nurse, and heeded not the interruption. Ah me, that I should have been so dull of sense! for I even noted not the unprecedented circumstance of the door being left unshut again by the intruder, who advanced, with the stealthy noiselessness of a cat, athwart the room to where we sat.

Quicker was the ear of Lady Gurty. As approached the steps, with one bound she sprang from her chair and turned. There, within a few feet, stood Lady Elizabeth Bristow, her distended eyes staring at Gurty, her cheeks blanched, and on her face a look of unutterable horror.

"Oh!" was all I could say, or rather groan forth.

What motive or feeling stirred the poor deformed maiden I know not, but of a sudden she extended her hand, and made a step forward as though with intent to grasp the silent figure before her. Thereupon Lady Elizabeth

rang out a shuddering cry, like unto nothing human, and turned and fled out of the room, uttering scream upon scream; for the maddening impression seemed upon her that poor gentle little Gurty was speeding furiously after, with intent to spring upon and tear her.

And now ran in nurse Prosser, scared and white, and followed anon by the Ladies Hyacinth and Frances, the Marquis of Belford and Count d'Alton, who had just arrived at the Castle. Greatly shamed—aye and grieved—was I to be obliged to make confession before them all of my culpable forgetfulness.

“Lady Elizabeth!” they repeated. “Oh, of all dangerous people, how unfortunate!”

“I knew she would do it! I was sure that dreadful woman would effect her purpose at last!” exclaimed Lady Frances, in much agitation, and looking at the count.

“Yes,” rejoined Lady Hyacinth; “and now, out of spite to Belford, because he will not marry her, you may depend upon it she will proclaim our horrible secret to all the county; and it would not surprise me if, before a fortnight has passed, the Castle were to be mobbed.

She talks of leaving, you know; and that soon. What can we do?"

"You must immediately take the lady into your confidence, and bind her to secrecy," quoth Count d'Alton; "such is the best course left for you to pursue, that I can think of at present."

"Yes, I will go at once," made answer Lady Frances. "She may even now be electrifying her lady's-maids with an account of—" and the maiden ran hastily from the room.

"If there had not been all this ridiculous fuss and folly made about the wretched little monster that there has," quoth the marquis, his comely features sadly disfigured by a most unholy disgust and passion, "this irremediable evil would not have happened—for irremediable, you may rely on my judgment, we shall find it"; and with a swift, reproving glance at me, and one of repugnance at his afflicted young sister, he strode haughtily to the door.

"One word before you go, marquis," said the count, decisively, going up to the angry nobleman. Now the count has a most commanding and noble presence, the like of which I have never before seen; and as there he stood, looking down

on the marquis, methought sculptors and painters would prize beyond all others so grand a model. Said he, "Do not mention to the duchess one word of what has occurred. If unfortunately she heard that woman's screams, tell her Lady Elizabeth was frightened by a mouse or a cat, or some such folly—anything rather than the truth, for at present she is in a more than unusually unfit state to bear excitement."

"It is not necessary to say that to me," made answer the young man, in a wondrously subdued but sulky tone, turning him the while from the count's eyes, which I noted when first I saw him bore within their depths a peculiar steadfastness and power. "I am not likely by word or act to risk distressing my mother; but if Frances thinks she can so easily stop that woman's tongue, she will find herself mistaken—that's all. Probably her very first act now was to rush to my mother's room;" saying which he walked away.

All this time poor Lady Gurty, her little thin white hand grasping the back of a chair, stood watching and listening. How much she comprehended of the whole scene I wot not; whether her benighted mind, by reason of its

now near approach to the realms of light, and perchance aided also by my earnest teachings and talkings, was open, as it had never been before, to the influence of mental perceptions, and therefore the unmitigated expression of repugnance in her brother's face, and the tone of his voice, jarred with sudden painfulness on some newly strung chord within its mysterious recesses, I cannot say. But so it was, at this juncture she swayed her back, and would have fallen to the floor in a deadly swoon, had not Count d'Alton caught her in his arms, and at once laid her on the sofa.

"Oh, she is dead!—my darling is dead!" cried the nurse, casting herself in an agony of grief beside the poor, senseless form.

Lady Hyacinth, with looks of terror, sped from the room, and anon Prosser carried Gurty into the chamber, and placed her on the bed.

Count d'Alton bade me not to follow, but to wait in the sitting-room, the which I did until the afflicted little maiden had recovered, whereupon I took my departure.

The noble count, to my surprise, shook me warmly by the hand, and said he,—

"I wish to my heart, Miss Beechley, there were more like you in this sorrowful world. God bless you!"

"Of a surety," thought I, speeding me home the while, and smiling at the conceit, "this count is some great prince in disguise; he can be nothing less. But verily who can he really be? How familiarly intimate is he with the proud Riversdales, and how submissive are the high-born young people to his opinions—aye, and his commands also! And how well he speaks English—with scarcely a perceptible foreign accent!"

Then returned my thoughts to the poor blighted child. Ah, too well knew I the boding meaning of that long, death-like faint. Be patient, be gentle, father and mother, brothers and sisters; but a brief while longer will the woeful object of your fears and shame mar the bright face of your world by her deformed albeit sinless presence.



## CHAPTER XIII.

EXTRACTS FROM SARIANN'S DIARY CONTINUED.

AH me! when the day before yester eve I writ in my journal, little dreamed I of the fearsome revelation pending over me—aye, and my beloved father—in the short space 'twixt then and now!

For years—yea, for nearly eight years—have I marvelled at, and longed, aye, even petitioned Heaven to reveal to me the meaning of that strange, impenetrable mystery enveloping the life of my brother as with a thick cloud, filling his noble heart with gloom and bitterness and sorrow.

I prayed—ah me! say I again—I prayed, yes, and now I know what for I prayed. And now—oh, it is all so dreadful, and so greatly exceeds my worst apprehensions, that would to

God—and yet—and yet—strange suspicions have at times possessed me.

Yester evening took place one of those entertainments at the Castle in which the pleasure-loving spirit of that great mansion doth so much delight.

For the last few days our dear father had not been so well in health, wherefore I decided not to leave him, though at first I bethought me I would; and Charles departed alone. Ennis was conveyed to the Castle by the Dormers.

At ten of the clock father went to bed, and soon after the servants also betook them to their rest; and with my books and work I sat me beside a cheery fire, awaiting Charles's return, as was my custom on such occasions.

Perchance he might be glad of a cup of tea, I thought, and prepared it accordingly; and if he comes not home in one of his sad moods, he will chat pleasantly of the events of the evening. Well, time crept on slowly enough, for I was weary with the day's employ, and sleepy too, as twelve o'clock drew near. Then said I to myself, for a surety Charles will not return ere one or two—nay, possibly, not till three

in the morning, and wherefore should not I enjoy a brief and most refreshing nap the while, which will strengthen my tired spirit against his arrival?

As thus I questioned, I heard, to my surprise, the sound of horses' feet speeding rapidly round to the stable-yard.

Charles had ridden to the Castle—he ever prefers that simple mode of conveyance to any other—but could this be he at so premature an hour?

His groom tarried for him in the kitchen.

Yes, it was Charles. In a few minutes he was coming with quick tread through the house to my sitting-room.

I marvelled at the change in his habitually slow, quiet walk—quiet, not to disturb our dear father; but now so unsubdued and hasty was the sound that a thrill of apprehension ran through my frame as I hearkened.

Did aught ail him—or any whom I loved? and, as I thus thought, the door opened abruptly, sharply, and wide, and Charles, his always pale face now of a deadly white, entered, leaving the door unshut, and cast himself, sighing heavily, into a chair beside the fire.

I saw that grief, not sickness, had smitten him, and with wildly throbbing heart, I said,—

“Ennis—is Ennis well?”

“I left her well,” he made answer, in tones low and dreary and muffled like a funeral bell, gazing the while into the fire.

I assailed him no more with questions, but went and took off his hat, and tenderly kissed his cold, damp forehead, and passed my fingers through his hair lovingly. Anon I quickly made him some tea, and, urging him much, got him to drink a dish thereof. But, alas! he scarce seemed to know what he did, and only to yield to my will mechanically. Presently, heaving a sigh so deep it sounded more like unto a moan, he rose and paced to and fro the room.

So woebegone and despairing did he look, his hands thrust low into his trousers pockets, his head depressed, that, ah me! I could not bear to see him, and quoth I,—

“Charles, forgive me for speaking, but it makes my heart ache more keenly than I can express to see you so wretched, and to feel so powerless, through ignorance of the cause, to say one word of comfort. You know how truly I love you, and you cannot but know you

deserve it: for are you not as good, affectionate, and kind a son and brother as this world contains. Tell me your sorrow, then, my poor dear Charles, that I might sympathize with and comfort you. Sit down here and tell me all—all—and let us talk it quietly over together. I entreat it of you for the sake of love, not curiosity. Oh, believe me, you would lighten your burdens of half—yes, half their weight, if you shared them with one so tender and loving as I am to you.”

“Sariann! Sariann! little idea have you—*little!*—not the remotest, not the faintest notion—of what it is you ask me to tell you!” he exclaimed, in a dreary tone of passionate bitterness, stopping awhile in his agitated walk. “Sympathy? Why, to-morrow, when my wretched secret is known, as it surely will be to all—yes, and to Ennis—I shall henceforth be shunned and dreaded as people fear a sleeping wild animal, which might at any moment awake and fly at their throats. Such will be their idea of me.”

Ah me! what did he mean? Was the woe which had eaten into his soul for so many years—was it at last destroying his noble intellect?

He was silent now, again pacing up and down the apartment. Presently he repeated, fiercely,—

“Sympathy!” then, as with sudden resolve, added, “well, be it so!”

Thereupon he once more cast himself into his chair, and for a brief space sat with averted face, plunged in thought. Then he roused himself, and said he,—

“Well, Sariann, be it as you wish. You shall have my sorrow—have it in full—unsoftened, unvarnished in any way; and then let me see how much of your sympathy I shall have in return.”

He stopped speaking, and drew a deep breath, as though a heavy weight lay on his heart.

“Nearly eight years ago I was, as you know, still at college. You know, too, that from first to last I went in for and gained every honour within my reach, that,—in short, my career throughout was one of continual success.”

“Yes, it was, indeed!” I exclaimed, proudly.

“Yes,” said he, drearily, “and what was the gain after all was done?—after all the frightful sacrifice of soul and body for that doing? A bankrupt brain! powerless to pay ten thoughts more! That was the balance remaining in my favour.”

“One night I became suddenly conscious of the evil pending over me: I forget in what way or from what cause the knowledge flashed upon me; I only remember the effect was like an electric shock—horrible! and, for a while, stunning! Then came a reaction, and I struggled defiantly against the conviction and against the fast-increasing warnings. At last, all doubt ended, all hope died within me; and now, to hide my awful affliction from you all—from the whole world—was my impelling feeling. Rapidly my arrangements were made, and on the final day I left England for Paris. It was perhaps a half-mad act; I know not.

“This evening I stood face to face with the man whom I love and dread as I do no other human being in the world! Whom I hoped—trusted—never to meet again on earth! Count d’Alton is Dr. Carlinez, the great physician, the possessor of that world-wide famed establishment for the insane near Paris. There, benevolently permitted by this noble-hearted man, I voluntarily incarcerated myself, and, during those three years I vanished from the world, remained, the best part of the time,

a raging maniac. This is my secret and my sorrow. You have it now, Sariann ; you have the fearful knowledge that the brother of whom you were so proud, in whom you so firmly trusted for protection and friendship, is constitutionally a 'madman,'—may become actually so again, any day. Now what say you to sympathy in a case like that ? ”

Naturally I possess an unutterable horror of insanity ; and as my poor brother proceeded with his fearsome account the blood waxed so chill in my veins it caused my very teeth to chatter. Howbeit, with God's help, so subdued I all outward signs thereof that amidst his excitement Charles perceived it not. And when, rising speedily, I cast my arms fearlessly, lovingly, around his neck and pressed him to my heart, and laid my cheek on his forehead, murmuring, well as my tears which fell upon his pale, woeful countenance would let me, that he was dearer to me than ever—that I loved him more now, if possible, that I knew of his bitter affliction, and the years of suffering he had gone through, than I did before—that I should be as proud and trustful of his noble intellect as heretofore, since



sure was I the attack of his brain was the result of overworking, and would never come again :—as I said all this, and perchance more, for I remember not clearly, a blessed and healthful change came o’er his perturbed feelings, and in the stillness of that midnight hour—seen only of me, his poor fond sister—he wept as he had not done since childhood. I stood by his side, resting my hand on his shoulder, and bending my face on his head, crying too—I could not help myself, albeit I feared that was not the way to comfort him. Anon he became calmer.

“There, dear Sariann,” quoth he, “that has done me good. It is the first time, and I trust it will be the last, that I yield to such a weakness. But, as you truly said, my sweet sister, my best friend on earth, it has already wonderfully lightened my load. Yes, I feel it has, thank God; and again I thank Him for giving me one of the noblest-hearted, kindest, best friends man ever had,” and he kissed my cheek fondly.

Methought, “This is a golden opportunity, which may never return: I will not lose it.” Thereupon, with quick, passing allusion to

Ennis Denzell's engagement to young Dormer, I spoke of gentle Dora Bell, and her strong, faithful love of years for himself. I said not much, nor asked, nor seemed to expect, any answer. Nor did he give any. The while I spake he sat him very still, his arm over the back of his chair, and forehead resting on his hand. When I stopped speaking he got up, and once more in thoughtful silence walked this way and that about the room.

On a sudden he stayed his steps before me, and said he, anxiously,—

“My poor little sister, how white and weary your dear, kind face is! Oh, go to bed, Sariann. I shall be losing you next, God help me! Go, child, at once. I too will try and sleep, for early to-morrow morning I shall start for town.”

My heart gave a great bound; and, seeing my fear, he said quickly,—

“Do not mistake me, Sariann. I promise to return shortly; but just now you must see yourself it will be best for me to leave Riversdale.”

“Yes.”

I saw he spoke truly, and thereupon I made no attempt to gainsay his resolve.

When the following morning I awoke from a troubled sleep, not sorry was I to learn—nay, it was even a relief—that Charles was already far on his way to the great city, and beyond reach of those distressful annoyances consequent, in some degree at least, on last night's events.

Anxiously did I this morning ponder in my heart whether or not to share with my dear father the fearful truth that had come to my knowledge. Finally I decided to wait and consult Lady Denzell, who hath so just and clear-sighted a judgment that I know I cannot err in following her advice, be it what it may.

Dear father hath been prematurely aged by reason of his past afflictions and his tender, sensitive nature; and perchance—I know not—perchance he, too, inheriteth a great dread of insane persons, as doth his daughter. Altogether I am filled with apprehension of the effects this new strange knowledge might have upon his shattered system; wherefore I have told him not yet.

After breakfast, the weather being fine, he went to the village to see and comfort some sick and afflicted folk, while I sat in our pleasant room, where, in the summer season, roses and jessamine peep in from all around the casement, their sweet breath filling the apartment with delicious perfume. I was finishing the making sundry little garments for poor, indolent Mary Dawkins's pretty children.

Alas! so it is, her husband, once the joy and pride of her heart, still remaineth but her sorrow and shame. Strange how quick and powerful the strong hand of evil to drag down, and trail through the slough of iniquity, the flowers and fruits of virtue! But, alas! how slow and difficult the culture and uprearing of the same!

But, thanks be to God, His holy Word doth promise that "stronger is He who is for us than he who is against us"; and therefore doth my spirit feel confidently hopeful that ere long the Star of Bethlehem will again be in the ascendant, and shine as heretofore brightly over poor little Riversdale.

Well, as I said, I had sat me down to work, and was bethinking me of these things—yes, and

of others too—(I can say it here), of George Bell. Of late he hath sought me much; aye, and seemeth to love me. He is like his father—good, honest, true, and kind hearted. He is of a fine, comely face and form too; but, alas for me! when last night's unhappy revelation is known to him will he make her his wife whose brother hath been three years in a madhouse?

While thus I questioned, old Martin, our butler and serving-man in divers capacities, brought me in a card. The name thereon caused me to start so much that it dropped from my trembling hand.

“Ask Count d’Alton to walk in,” I said, as he stooped and picked it up; and the next minute the count entered the room. Again I cannot withhold me from declaring that never have I seen a man of so noble and gracious a presence.

He had come wishing much to see Mr. Charles Beechley, he said, and was greatly disappointed to find he had left that morning for London. Then he stopped speaking, and at my request seated himself, and looked keenly and questioningly at me; and said I to that look,—

“Yes, Count d’Alton, I know all now. My poor brother confessed the whole truth to me last night; more, perhaps, than even his kind, generous friend, *Dr. Carlinez*, is acquainted with.”

“Then he told you of his attempted suicide?” rejoined the count.

“Yes, oh, yes, everything,” saith I, shrinking from the subject, which was too painful to me: I could not bear to speak upon it.

He did not ask more, but added, thoughtfully, “Yes, that was the last act I believed him then capable of, suicidal tendencies having quite left him. But I am truly glad to hear he has made a confidante of his sister; it is a healthy, sensible proceeding, that proves better than anything the present clearness of his intellect.”

To hear this gladdened my heart; and now we talked much and freely of poor Charles. I consulted him, too, touching my father’s knowledge of the long-hidden secret.

“No,” he said; “*Dr. Beechley* was, according to my account, too old, infirm, and his nervous system too much shattered, to make it advisable to risk a disclosure which might

prove of a very appalling nature to one of his advanced age and delicate state of health. The past was softened down by distance, and probably a large portion already forgotten. He is now tranquil; leave him so."

By-and-by he begged of me my brother's address, the which I right joyfully gave him; for, said he,—

"I purpose writing a long and comforting letter to Mr. Beechley, that I feel certain will bring him quickly back to Riversdale."

Ere his departure, he shook me warmly by the hand as before, and quoth he, the while a deep flush passed over his handsome countenance,—

"I may have—I know not for *certain* yet, but I may have—a great favour to beg of you, Miss Beechley, before leaving your beautiful village—a favour from, perhaps, both you and your brother."

I looked the surprise I felt; but, feeling secure in my heart he was not a man who would ask aught from any to which appertained the faintest taint of wrong, I made ready, earnest answer,—

“In any way in which Charles and I can serve you, Count, depend securely upon our assistance.”

He smiled, and thanked me gratefully, and anon departed.

Months—it matters not how many—have rolled by since last I wrote in this my diary ; months laden with events which, if fairly entered upon, would each one fill a volume. To begin with the highest in position, as is right and proper so to do, Lady Frances Rippon is married to Count d’Alton. Who that sees and knows this regal-looking man will wonder at her choice, considering also how much, by reason of peculiar circumstances, they were thrown together ; a man who, as Charles hath it (and who better able to know that than he ?)—a man whose soul is as noble as his form ?

In this wise came about their marriage.

A week after my first converse with Count d’Alton at the Rectory, Charles, to my great thankfulness, returned him to Riversdale ; and speedily he and the count renewed all their old friendship, and became such constant com-



panions that most days did they ride, drive, or walk together. To my exceeding joy, likewise, my poor brother became daily more happy, even blithesome, and like unto his self of bygone years.

Said he, when one evening he and I were alone,—

“Sariann, Dr. Carlinez this morning asked me if you and I would grant him a great favour. For myself of course I answered at once; I would do anything for him within my mortal power to perform. You I must leave to reply for yourself.”

“Ye-s,” I said, hesitatingly; for, so it was, something Ennis had lately confided to my knowledge warned me now of the coming request, and filled my heart with distressing perplexity as to the right course my Christian duty required of me to follow.

“It is this,” continued Charles, “that we will aid him in his intended marriage with Lady Frances, to whom he has been long attached.”

“What does he want us to do, dear Charles?” I questioned, anxiously; “anything that is not wrong I will gladly—most gladly

assist them in to the utmost of my ability, but—”

“Exactly, dear,” interposed Charles, “for he is the last man in the world who would wish you to do otherwise, and the favour he now begs is, in my opinion, a perfectly good and honest one.”

This assurance comforted me immensely.

“You do not know, perhaps,” quoth my brother, “that the count has been staying for the last few days at the Bell. His offer of marriage to the daughter, which he abstained from making until supported by his recently inherited title, was at once indignantly rejected by both parents. Fortunately, however, for Lady Fanny, she is her father’s favourite child; and still more fortunate, too, he is possessed of an exceedingly good-natured, easy-going, vacillating disposition, which the pretty, spoilt daughter generally succeeds in moulding into any shape that pleases her. Secretly working upon his kindheartedness, she gained his consent—a very reluctant one it seems, and with a promise on her part that his weakness, as he calls it, is to be carefully hidden from his wife and eldest son and daughter. But, backed by her father’s sanction, what cares Lady Fanny for

the rest of the family? Her great anxiety, however, is to effect her plan in such a way as to secure him from the chance of any after-blame and annoyance, for she is warmly attached to her kind old father, who she knows is, notwithstanding his love for the beautiful duchess, very fearful of offending her. To ask our honourable father to perform the ceremony of a secret marriage would, we know, be worse than useless; therefore the lovers have decided that it shall be consummated in Allensmoor Church, of course by special licence."

"Allensmoor!" quoth I; "let me see, that village is seven or eight miles distant, is it not?"

"Yes—about that. The wedding is to take place next week. I have promised to be 'best man,' and you, Sariann, you must come with the poor girl and be her bridesmaid."

"I will, Charles," I said, readily: "her father's consent makes it all right. He has been intimate with the count a good many years, and must therefore be well informed of the style of man he is in disposition, character, and principles. Oh, yes, I will gladly help them to the utmost of my ability."

“Thank you, dear Sariann; that is just like your clear good sense and good feeling,” answered Charles, kissing me gratefully, as though the favour were only for himself. “Well, *that* difficulty is comfortably laid at rest,” he added, “and I will go at once and cheer my kind friend by telling him. By-the-by, I forgot to tell you that Carlinez—Count d’Alton, I mean—received a few good-natured, friendly lines from the duke (written, of course, to please and satisfy his pet daughter), giving his consent to their marriage, but requesting that, for the present, this permission on his part was to be kept secret.” The word “present” was underlined.

Dear, beautiful Ennis, the bonniest flower in all the country round, is also wedded and gone from amongst us; wedded to that frank, honest-hearted youth, Henry Dormer. Ah me! how many a bitter heartache was felt as merrily rang out the bells! Had not their jubilant sound carried with it a promise of her speedy return to again dwell amongst us, Ennis Denzell’s marriage-day, instead of one of joy throughout the village, would have been one of

lasting woe, so dearly loved is the sweet gracious maiden of all who know her.

Yes, so is it arranged ; during the lifetime of her father-in-law (Lord Dormer) the two young people, Henry and Ennis Dormer, will live at Riversdale Court, which place, and all else in her power to bestow, Lady Denzell has settled upon her beloved grandchild, to be inherited by her at Lady Denzell's decease.

Harry Dormer dearly loveth the country, its scenes and sports and occupations, and it will delight him to be master (nominally, of course, while liveth the kind and gentle grandmother) of his darling wife's old home, and to look after and care for it, now age and infirmities incapacitate Lady Denzell for such anxieties. But at present Ennis is abroad with her husband. Never were two young creatures more suited to each other, or more sure (God willing) to thoroughly enjoy every pleasant and beautiful and curious thing they can see and hear and do in those bright foreign lands than are Harry and Ennis Dormer. And, in his loving, manly way, he will be so tenderly careful of his sweet, precious treasure—his matchless child-wife.

Poor Charles !—poor, poor Charles ! Heavier than his death-warrant, far, far heavier, came upon him the consummation of that dreaded event. All the previous night of the wedding did he pace him to and fro his room. All night !—all night ! Ah me ! how dreary was the sound ! how full of a woe that I dreaded might drive his already long-harassed brain again to madness !

Often crept I to his locked door, and hearkened. I could not sleep or rest ; and twice I earnestly petitioned of him to let me in to talk to and comfort him, but he would not ; and ere I was down the next morning he was gone, nor saw I him again for two long months. He left a kind little note for me in his room, the which I thanked my God for, as also did father and I for many more, writ to us from divers places he was wandering hither and thither to. His last address was a beauteous spot on the Rhine, in Germany ; and then, to our joy, Charles himself arrived at the Rectory in greatly restored health and peace.

All this while did my friendship increase with the worthy family of the Bells, more especially with George, now Major Bell, and

gentle Dora. Major Bell doth purpose leaving the army and aiding his father, who is well stricken in years, in the management of their property, which is, he wisely saith, too small to be cumbered with a hired steward. And now, without further circumlocution, I will tell you that (thanks to my Heavenly Father for so blessing me) I am engaged to be wedded to George Bell. Aye, it is a blessing; for he is a good man and a righteous, notwithstanding that the youthful portion of his life hath been spent in the world among many God-forgetting—yes, and godless—men and women.

Known to him is the sad story of my brother. I deemed it right, in confidence, to tell him all. Howbeit, he heeds it not. “He loves me,” he saith, “and esteems and values me above all other women.” Ah! God grant I may, with His divine help, continue to my life’s end to merit this prized opinion.

But, oh, greatest of all happiness! my poor, long-afflicted brother hath at last found him rest— a safe rest for his weary heart in the love and in the promised wifely care and tenderness of Dora Bell. Her future home—for a while, at least—lieth in the great city of Lon-

don; but mine, and right glad am I of the same, will continue in the beauteous country. In this wise is it to be.

Attached to the Bell estate is a moderate-sized, comely dwelling, most charmingly situated on the outskirts of the park. It is of picturesque albeit ancient construction, having been the dower-house of the Bell family from time immemorial. Since the decease of the last aged dame, mother of the present Mr. Bell, it hath, to preserve it from harm and damp, been habited by the bailiff.

Well, this is to be George's and my house during his good father's stay on earth, which the Lord grant may yet be for a long season. In my humble opinion, and to my simple taste, the old dower-house will be a much more genial abode than the great mansion they live in; and vastly more home like.

The Marquis of Belford left Riversdale a week prior to Ennis Denzell's marriage. So it was, his love for the beautiful maiden seemed to increase tenfold after her rejection of his suit. Evident to all was his uncontrollable attachment, and his equally uncontrollable sorrow because of its hopelessness. He cared not



that people saw and knew of his passion, so humbled by the one great all-subjugating feeling were pride, dignity, and even self-respect ; nay, so subdued, that again, aye, and again, did he get him a private hearing of Ennis, and entreated of her to try and love him, and become the joy and the priceless treasure of his existence—his darling wife.

Poor, tender-hearted maiden ! she was sorely put to, now that he took this course, and he perceived she was ; and, yes, verily, what with his handsome, honestly sorrowful looks, his constant pleadings, his now simple, boyishly lover-like manner, I do believe he would have won her heart unto himself had it not already been disposed of beyond power for such-like faithful hearts to be re-purchased by any, even the richest, offerings of love. But so wretched did the poor young man become, that at the last she petitioned me to tell him of her engagement to Harry ; for, with maiden coyness, she had kept a profound secret this her girl's attachment. Nor could she now get up her courage to confess it, even to damp, if not extinguish, the ardour of the poor Marquis of Belford's affection for her.

And so I watched my opportunity, and told him. Ennis had begged me to do so, I said. They are very painful to me, these messages 'twixt Ennis and her lovers. That was the third; for lately had I also to speak in like fashion to poor Charles, aye, notwithstanding he knew of her engagement to young Dormer; but perchance he believed it not at first, so many reports of this kind are sure to fly about of a maiden beautiful as she is. Reginald Belford hearkened to me in silence, as though I were passing sentence of death upon him, his face becoming of an ashen hue, and all light going out of his comely features. "And but for that fellow I should have won her; I know I should," saith he, in so changed a voice, no tone of his own remained in it. "Poor Fred! I can feel for you now."

One day Lady Frances came to me; she oft-times did so ere her wedding, and saith she,—

"My sister Hyacinth and Lady Elizabeth Bristow have had a quarrel, and I am dreading the consequences, for that is a dangerous woman to offend. You see, having discovered our secret, she has it now in her

power to bring down no end of annoyances upon us, that would make mamma's stay here impossible."

"Oh, dear!" said I, "how sad and mischievous a passion is temper! What was the cause of their quarrel? Perhaps they can be persuaded to make it up again."

"No, I fear not. Hyacinth was, as we all were for that matter, highly indignant with Elizabeth because of her treacherously worming out the secret of our family affliction, and reproached her sharply for her ingratitude and unfriendliness, concluding with a passionate accusation of her having been solely influenced by a most unwarrantable, ill-bred spirit of curiosity. From one angry speech to another they both worked themselves and each other into such a wrathful state that politeness only prevented their becoming positively abusive in their language." Lady Frances smiled, half sadly, half amused, as she said this. "Their opposite natures made the expression of their sentiments different, that was all," she resumed; "for while Hyacinth, forgetful alike of dignity and position, scolded, and almost raved with uncontrollable passion at the deceitful creature, Elizabeth, although in a white-

heat rage, kept so firm a rein on her manner, words, and looks, that she was perfectly able to bring all to act with an effective keenness that under the circumstances aggravated poor Cinth beyond endurance, and drove her nearly wild. "And what do you think she was so imprudent as to say?"

"What did she say?" quoth I, anxiously. "Nothing unflattering about the marquis, I trust?"

"Just that, and no less!" rejoined Lady Frances. "She exclaimed, with passionate vehemence,—‘Well, one good your impertinent curiosity has effected at least; and I am so glad! If Belford ever had a serious thought on the subject of marriage this act of yours will do away with it at once and utterly!’"

"The cold, shimmering smile peculiar to her played round her lips, and made her eyes bristle like needle-points, as she said, quietly,—

"‘An unnecessary rejoicing on your part, my dear. Your brother is perfectly well aware that I have never entertained the remotest intention of conferring any such honour either on himself or you.’"

"‘Frances and I would scorn so dishonourable

and vulgarly prying a sister-in-law!’ retorted Cinth.”

“Good gracious, my dear!” saith I, “those were terribly strong words to use indeed! What answer did she return to them?”

“She smiled and bowed with calm, cutting scorn; that was all. You may imagine that I spared no efforts of persuasion to stop them,” continued Lady Frances; “for every reason I did so, but especially because knowing what a very dangerous enemy Lady Elizabeth is capable of being.”

“Oh, yes! oh, dear, yes!” sighed I.

“Count d’Alton had even warned us to be on our guard; but nothing I could say made the slightest impression on Hyacinth; she was so angry, she lost all self-control: never before had I seen her in so wild and wicked a passion!”

Again I sighed, bethinking me, “Alas! what a miserable, dangerous, mischievous passion is an evil temper!”

“‘*I* am more sure of *this* than he of *that*,’ Hyacinth retorted,” continued Lady Frances, “‘which is that no serious thought has ever entered his heart or mind concerning you, or

*any* woman, excepting Ennis Denzell. She, we know, he loves—loves her madly, and, if he could, would marry her this moment! But *you*—bah!’

“At last the barb had entered—pierced to her very heart’s centre. She has always been intensely jealous of Miss Denzell, and suspicious of Reggie’s preference for her; but to have this preference thus openly, positively confirmed—to hear that it infinitely exceeds her worst, her strongest suspicions (for she knew well Hyacinth would not have made such a declaration unless quite certain, not only of its truth, but also of my brother’s love-blinding indifference to that truth being known to all)—came down upon her with so severe a blow that she actually staggered under it. During their quarrel she had been sweeping backwards and forwards across the room, but now she suddenly seated herself, and her usually pale face became so frightfully ghastly I thought she was on the point of fainting. She did not, however; she sat very still, and, with the same hateful smile gleaming over her features, said, in a wonderfully cool, steady tone, ‘I do not wonder at him. Miss Denzell is not only the most

beautiful girl I have ever seen, but has also the most charming expression of countenance and bewitching manner. She struck me with jealous surprise—yes, *jealous*—the first time I saw her, for I instantly felt how utterly extinguished every other woman would be in her splendid presence—how absolutely *plain*, in fact, they all looked beside her !’

“ This was a Roland for Hyacinth’s Oliver ; she felt it keenly as such, and reddened conspicuously, as her adversary had whitened, saying, in her foolish, impetuous way,—

“ ‘ Oh, it’s not merely her beauty ; there are plenty of other girls as handsome as she is !’

“ ‘ Indeed !’ replied Elizabeth, delighted at sight of the enemy’s annoyance, ‘ I don’t know where they are to be found, then ; for never have I seen one that could, or can, bear comparison with Miss Denzell.’

“ ‘ It is her kindness of heart and amiable disposition which captivate Belford,’ dashed on Hyacinth, ignoring the interruption. ‘ He fell in love with her that first Sunday, when, disregarding appearances and all else, she rushed into the road to save the life of the old beggar-man !’

“‘In-deed!’ repeated Elizabeth, elevating her dark eyebrows, and throwing into face and tone an expression of sarcasm which I am sure she only could render so cutting, ‘I should hardly have given the marquis, or you either, credit for the power of even understanding, much less appreciating, a noble act of heroism of that nature!’

“It was an indescribable relief to me to hear the sound of approaching footsteps,” added Lady Francis. “The two belligerents, who were fast working themselves into a state of fury, regardless of everything, had just self-control enough left to take warning and cease their foolish quarrel. I do believe, if not thus stopped, they would—high-born and high-bred ladies as they are—have come to boxing each other’s ears, and perhaps throwing things at each other’s carefully dressed heads. Hyacinth hurried away through the conservatory as friends entered the room; but Elizabeth, true to her character, remained, and soon chatted and joked as composedly as if the previous frightful conflict between herself and Cinth had been merely a little good-humoured difference concerning some point of fashion in dress.”



“I am very sorry they are at enmity,” saith I, “and that Lady Hyacinth was so unguarded in what she said; very, very sorry. Has Lady Elizabeth left the Castle?”

“No. We fully expected she would instantly take her departure; but here she is still, nevertheless, and in all seeming intends continuing. Elizabeth is a great favourite of mamma’s, to whom she makes herself both useful and agreeable; and hitherto mamma would not hear of her leaving her.”

“Well,” quoth I, “I do wonder she can bear to stay after what has occurred!”

“Oh, she has her reasons for it. One thing, she is desperately in love with my brother Reginald, as you partly know, and I do not really think she would stop short of any means by which she could effect marrying him. The count is persuaded—and indeed we all are—that the impelling motive to discover our secret is to use it in promoting her wishes, or as a means of vengeance in case of a total failure of the same.”

## CHAPTER XIV.

EXTRACTS FROM SARIANN'S DIARY CONTINUED.

"BUT," sighed Lady Frances, bestirring her out of a rather long, thoughtful silence into which she had lapsed, "the principal motive of my visit this morning is not so much to talk of that uninteresting woman, but of poor, gentle little Gurty."

"Little Gurty!" quoth I, anxiously. "What of her?—is she worse?"

"Dying!—dying fast, Dr. Carlinez says."

"Dying!" repeated I, in sad astonishment; "how sudden! I did not think her near that."

"No; none of us did. She is altogether singular, and from first to last has baffled even Dr. Carlinez's unrivalled intellect."

"She is a strange being," said I, "truly a strange being."

“Yes, and, stranger than all else, since the day of that painful scene in her room, the poor child has gradually—there is no mistake about it—gradually pined and sunk. Nurse Prosser declares it will be the cause of her death; and yet we cannot discover why!”

“Yes,” rejoined I, “for, although she fainted, she, neither at the time nor afterwards (from what I hear), showed any feelings of distress or fear, or was even startled,—in fact, not excited in any way.”

“No; that has always been a remarkable feature in her case—the total absence, apparently, of every sensation of nervous excitement. Despite the solitary life she has lived, Gurty never displayed the slightest fear or dislike of strangers; on the contrary, they were, as you saw in your own case, merely subjects of curiosity and interest to her—sometimes of amusement and pleasure.”

“Yes, I noticed that with regard to myself,” I said.

“Speaking of your kind self, dear Miss Beechley, brings me to the principal reason of my visit. Will you come, as soon as you possibly can, to the poor little dying creature?

She is always asking for you—and her days are numbered. Yesterday she ruptured a blood-vessel during a fit of coughing ; you may conceive therefore how hopeless her case is.”

“Is she confined to her bed?” I asked, presently.

“No ; she could not bear the stillness and confinement, and became so unhappily restless whenever Prosser left her side that Dr. Carlinez said she might do as she liked, for nothing could prolong her life beyond a very few days.”

I bethought me Charles was now at home, and I could leave my father quite comfortably ; for just at present he was much better and stronger than he had been a long while, thank God. So said I, “Yes, I will come back with you now, if you are returning ; if not—”

“Oh, thank you !” interposed Lady Frances, warmly, “that is just what I was wishing you to do ; but I did not quite like taking the liberty of proposing such a hasty arrangement.”

Ennis Denzell's rejection of their two noble brothers—perhaps also my, it may be, too independent treatment and regarding of them—

selves and their greatness, have certainly much humbled, and thereby improved the young ladies Riphon; so, at least, it seems to me.

“Have any suspicious persons been seen in the Castle grounds quite lately?” quoth I, while driving on our way thither. “Prosser said it was thought there had been a short time back.”

“No; I am thankful to say our alarms must have arisen from some mistake.”

“I trust they did,” said I; howbeit, in my heart I thought not there had been any—any mistake, I mean; and for this reason I thought it: on divers occasions of late Charles and I have seen Lady Elizabeth walking rapidly, and with seeming watchful manner, to the village post-office. Now what need had she so to do, swarming as is that great mansion with hirelings of every degree, to say nought of her own especial maidens—three in number, I believe? But, oh, can it be possible that one in her position can so bemean herself as to plan and strive to thus annoy, yea, and even injure, a family from whom she has received so much kindness, merely to gratify a poor feeling of revenge against the son?

Charles saith, a woman, whose love has been slighted and rejected for another, will oft-times become as furious and revengeful as a wounded wild tiger, and more dangerous, because it is not so easy to be on your guard to counteract her evil intentions. He may be right, I know not ; and I pray that the good God will keep me from the unhappy worldly experience which teacheth such bitter knowledge.

Gurty never laughed or smiled. She has not been seen to do so in her whole life ; but there would come a certain softening, a lighting up of her poor deformed features, when her spirit was gladdened by aught, that methinks plainly proves the human smile was within, albeit no positive outward sign of the same appeared. Thus it was now, when, turning, she saw her sister Frances and me enter the room.

“There, Gurty,” exclaimed the former, in a kindly affectionate voice, “you see how well I have kept my promise, for I have brought Miss Beechley back with me to give you some more of that sweet music you are so fond of. She always calls you the music-lady,” added Lady Frances, mournfully turning to me.

“Prosser tells me she is singularly fond of music,” I said, “and that while staying in Dr. Carlinez’s establishment, she would listen rapturously by the hour to one of the patients playing on the pianoforte.”

“Yes,” replied Lady Frances, in a tender tone, placing her hand on Gurty’s shoulder, “he says, ‘a beautiful spirit lies bound within this strange prison-cell.’”

“True,” said I, looking down with mournful feeling on the greatly wasted form of the mute little creature, her thin white hand solemnly put into mine, “true—a beautiful spirit, that by-and-by will break its bonds, and, like a butterfly, bright, exquisite, wing its way from out the dark, misshapen chrysalis upwards, heavenwards.”

Now, as I thus earnestly spoke, there came an expression into the poor deformed face which only quite of late has visited it, and that only on rare occasions. It is an expression I can scarcely explain—full of anxious inquiry and bewilderment, albeit full also of an unusual intelligence and joy, as her restless eyes wandered to and fro Lady Fanny’s and my countenances.

So singular was it that the sister was startled, and said she, in a low tone,—

“Miss Beechley, do you see *that*? What does it mean? Is she going to die?”

Nurse Prosser heard this, and hurried up, and, putting her arm round the child, led her to a sofa, saying, fondly,—

“You must not stand so much, my darling; and, Lady Frances, I think you had better not stay longer, my dear. Dr. Carlinez ordered her to be kept very quiet, and two of you are too many.”

“Yes; perhaps so. I will come again by-and-by,” made answer the maiden, looking doubtfully, and somewhat wonderingly, at the invalid, as with lingering step she quitted the room.

For a long while I sat beside Gurty, sometimes talking, anon silent, fearing to weary her, for she seemed to me to be sinking rapidly out of life. She lay on the sofa, expressing no desire now to leave it, hearkening to my pious teachings, and ever and anon murmuring, in her strange, grave, deep-toned voice,—

“Go on—please go on. I like it—I like it”; and there would come into her solemn



countenance that look of intelligence, the which had so surprised Lady Frances.

To my mind it was the partial awakening up of the spell-bound spirit within, preparatory to its flight to the happy land.

By-and-by the poor, weary little creature fell asleep, and, fearing to break this—I hoped—strengthening slumber, I moved not. Nurse Prosser sat beside the window, working.

The shades of evening came creeping on, for the days were short; but the child woke not. Mistress Prosser laid down her work and rose, and stood gazing down on her—then softly felt her pulse.

“This sleep will do her good; do you not think so, nurse?” quoth I, anxiously, for her face took a sad and grave expression.

She shook her head mournfully.

“No,” said she; “she will but wake out of this sleep to die, poor darling, poor, gentle, loving little darling, if she wakes again in this world, which I scarcely think she will”; and the kind creature wiped her eyes.

“To die?” repeated I, sorrowfully. “Then I cannot go home to-night. There is no one to stay with you. I cannot leave you. It

would be very painful, very distressing, to you to be alone."

"Yes, ma'am, I must say it would," she made answer; "for I feel sure she will not outlive the night. Leastways, it will be the utmost she can do, if she does. Her pulse is next to nothing now."

"No, I cannot leave you, that is clear," said I, bethinking me awhile. Then I added, "I will send a note to my father, explaining matters; and he will quite approve of my intentions."

The while I writ my little epistle nurse Prosser carried the still-slumbering child into her bed-room, and disrobed and laid her in bed. She did not wake, for truly, as the good woman said, the sleep of death was upon her.

Lady Frances, sumptuously attired, and with every movement wafting around her a luscious perfume, came at a late hour to see how fared it with Gurty.

Truly pleased was the graceful maiden at sight of my presence in the sitting-room (Prosser sat beside the sick child); for, said she, Dr. Carlinez had told them in the morning

her hours were numbered, and this made her wish that I should visit her at once, the poor little thing was so anxious to see me.

“She knew not she was dying,” I said; “how singular, therefore, she should have felt so strong a desire to see me!”

“Yes, it was strange,” replied Lady Frances, thoughtfully; “but in many ways of late she has shown marked differences which surprised Prosser.”

I bethought me again of the struggling soul, but said nought. In truth, I was too sad at heart to speak on those matters in which the gay maiden might perchance feel little interest and less faith; and, after some further talk and divers kind proposals on Lady Fanny’s part touching my comfort and pleasure, she floated forth from the room, reminding me of some lovely foreign bird which had wandered by chance to our uncongenial shores, and, with eager haste, gladly departed to its own warm, sunny region.

Mistress Prosser and I drank tea together in the sitting-room. Anon she returned to her nursing, and I occupied myself in reading and working.

At twelve of the clock Prosser came to tend the fire; and as Gurty still slumbered on, her breathing growing heavier as the few remaining hours of her brief, joyless life passed gently, painlessly, away for ever, Prosser seated herself with me for a little while. Have you noted (oft-times has it fallen to my lot to do so) what a singular, unaccountable power have the midnight hours to draw out the confidences of the human heart, of throwing wide the door of memory, and letting forth secret weaknesses—confessions of bygone or present joys and sorrows; of making known deeds and events which in the glare of day would not be partially remembered, but wholly concealed from all, even the dearest friend, with shrinking anxiety,—aye, and with perchance keen shame?

Frequently do I marvel what unseen spiritual influence can be at work during these border hours 'twixt night and day to so subdue and humble and excite mortal feelings. Methinks o'er all, at some period of their lives, must this strange power have held sway; and so it now was with Mistress Prosser and me.

The kind creature—usually so reticent—talked freely and much of her many past trials and afflictions—talked as I am sure she had not done for years, if ever before—and anon I told her of some of mine.

We discoursed presently of Gurty. Verily it astonished me how exceeding beloved that poor deformed child was by her amiable-hearted nurse. Truly, I think she perceived not her fearsome uncomeliness; for saith she,—

“If her sisters possessed the dear child’s sweet and gentle expression of face, it would be well for them. Lady Frances has some of it, but nothing equal to Lady Gurty.”

Thought I, “If that first fair maiden only heard you!”

“It has always been a sorrow to me,” went on nurse Prosser, “that Her Grace the duchess from the moment of its birth regarded the poor innocent with such fear and abhorrence. She adds to her sin in doing so, and she must know she does.”

“Sin?” quoth I; “what sin?”

“The sin of pride, my dear child—a pride so great she would not believe in the possibility

of any affliction coming upon one in her exalted position of a like kind with which the lowly born are stricken."

"And yet the beautiful duchess seems to me of a kindly disposition."

"Yes; the afflictive birth of poor little Gurty has improved her character wonderfully," replied Mistress Prosser. "Happily for her, she looks upon it in its true light—regards it (as in truth it is) as a stroke of justice, before which she must humble herself for fear of further punishment."

By-and-by, while thus we talked, the good old woman's weary head began to nod, oppressed with a drowsiness which was unconsciously creeping over her senses; her voice thickened, and finally, after divers efforts to resist the mastering influence, she sank back in the easy-chair on which she sat and fell asleep. Feeling the example somewhat infectious, I took a book and occupied myself in reading, but keeping an attentive ear on Gurty the while.

Hitherto the weather had been very still; howbeit now a slight wind began to wave the leafless trees to and fro, and to shake the

window-frames. All at once I heard a sound that struck me as different to the others, albeit they were of a varied kind too. Laying down my book, I hearkened. Yes, I was sure I was right,—there was some strange noise in Gurty's room; and, springing up, I hastened with palpitating heart to the door, and stood and looked in.

A fire burned in the grate, but first it cast forth too uncertain a light for me to distinguish aught clearly. Attracted by the sound, my eye presently wandered up to the window, which faced me at the far end of the chamber. There a sight met me that for some seconds actually took away my breath and power of moving. The window was shuttered, albeit within, and stretching downwards, showing plainly against the light wood, was the large, dark, hairy arm of a man. Nought else was there to be seen of him but this one huge, bare limb. Happily my bewilderment lasted not long, and with returning sense I noted that the fingers were striving to unhasp the small iron bar fastening the shutter.

Flying back to Mistress Prosser, she woke at my first touch.

"Some one is trying to get in at Gurty's window," panted I, scarce able to speak.

To my great relief she comprehended in an instant, and with an energy and swiftness I had not thought could still appertain to her years jumped up and sped into the chamber.

The weird-looking arm still worked almost noiselessly at the bar, and to my astonishment nurse Prosser, seizing a poker, ran and dealt it so fiercely murderous a blow that the unhappy owner thereof uttered a groan of agony and terror, the arm vanishing like unto magic on the instant.

"It is safe enough now," murmured Prosser. "And will you mind staying here a minute or two while I go and tell them what has happened, my dear young lady?"

"Ye-s, certainly—oh, yes," said I, feeling, I confess, greatly loth to bide alone. The fearsome sight of that bodiless arm, and that dreadful shuddering cry and groan, had chilled my very heart. Meanwhile Mistress Prosser was gone, and I fetched me a candle and ran to the window to make sure the fastenings were still secure. Yes, it was all right. Verily, it would have passed possibility for one hand



to have unhasped the bar, which shut with a spring. But with trembling did I scan the large round hole the robber had with exceeding skill cut through the glass and the shutter in the upper part. Evidently he had not calculated on the iron bar, or the opening would have been both lower and larger.

Hearing a movement behind me, I started and turned, and, lo! Gurty was setting erect, gazing with scared face.

Putting the candle on the mantel-shelf, I hastened to her.

“You have slept a nice long time, dear,” said I, soothingly. “Do you feel better?”

That expression of intelligence which I before wrote about glowed up into her poor deformed countenance at the sound of my voice.

“I have been talking to one of those beautiful angels you told me of,” said she, in a low, peaceful tone; “talking about that lovely country you say I am going to, and of the great King there, and—and our Saviour.”

Never before had she spoken so sensibly, and her voice was so strangely changed in sound, it was not the least like unto her own.

“Look!” quoth the little creature, rap-

turously, "there she is again! And oh, there are many, many more all coming round the bed! Hark! they are singing!" and she held up her small, wasted hand. "How sweet!—how sweet! They are asking me to come away with them! Yes, I will! Oh, yes! yes!"

Of a sudden she made a movement to rise, then sank back, and, with a soft sigh, her pure young spirit joined that bright, heavenly host, which I verily believe the afflicted one did see hovering around her bed, awaiting her coming.

Just then, to my relief, nurse Prosser returned.

All the remainder of that night she and I kept vigil in the death-chamber. Truly would it have gone hard with the worthy woman had I not tarried with her to aid and watch, for none of the family would stay beside the poor lifeless body.

Next morning, at an early hour, I sped me home, feeling in no mood to hold converse with any of the Castle folk.

The mortal remains of Lady Guernsey Riphon are laid in the family vault of the

Riversdales, in our church, my dear father performing the burial service; and a close guard is kept upon the body, and will be long maintained, for fear of sacrilegious disturbance of the same.

Despite much search, so it is, the man who so nearly wrought an entrance into Gurty's chamber has not yet been caught; and his evil motive might have abided a mystery for ever, had not the discovery been thus brought about.

Lady Frances came one morning to the Rectory, to see and thank me gratefully for (as she expressed it) my generous, noble-hearted kindness to Gurty, and to beg my acceptance of a beauteously bound set of Miss Strickland's 'Queens of England,' the which she had heard me speak of with much praise—I mean the reading thereof, also a costly ring, always worn by Lady Gurty, and sent to me by the duchess. It had belonged first to Lady Frances, who, because the poor child was taken by its beauty, gave it to her.

Both gifts pleased me much, and were quite after mine own heart, for the ring holds bound within its gemmed loop memories I love to

cherish, and wish never to forget; and the many-volumed work of England's Queens is a very library of useful and most amusing knowledge, the which I had long desired to have. Albeit I did not feel I deserved such reward for the merely doing a Christian duty I would have done for any.

"Oh," saith Lady Frances, the tears sparkling in her soft eyes, "if your *deserts* are to be placed in the debit and credit scales, our case will be hopeless. What have we good enough to meet such a demand as that!"

Presently she told me some news, parts of which surprised me. The police had found and caught the unseen burglar. He was traced by means of his injured arm, for the vigorous blow Prosser had dealt it in the moment of desperation had fractured it so dreadfully that he was obliged to lay up under surgical care, and was still powerless to move.

Lady Elizabeth Bristow left the Castle the day following this announcement; "and what do you think, Miss Beechley?" continued Lady Frances, excitedly: "no wonder she took flight so rapidly, for she was only just in time as it was! This morning came a letter to papa—an

anonymous letter—making such a disclosure! The man who was taken, the letter said, was wholly innocent of any intention of robbing the Castle, but had been hired by persons in correspondence with one of the guests—a Lady Elizabeth Bristow—to carry off, alive and unharmed, the monster child confined in the left wing of the building. As the undertaking had failed, however, and now the monkey-girl was dead, the writer felt anxious not only to save the prisoner from further punishment, but also to warn the duke against the treacherous friend who had betrayed them for the sum of five thousand pounds, she having confidently promised that hundreds of thousands would be speedily realized by the kidnappers of the monster-child, in America and elsewhere, on exhibiting so wonderfully hideous, so unprecedently unnatural a spectacle. Enclosed was a letter from Elizabeth,” continued Lady Frances, “giving a graphic description of poor little Gurty, and advising an instant securing of the invaluable prize, as the family were meditating a return to the Continent, where matters might not be so easily managed as in a solitary country place in England.”

“My goodness!” gasped I, “who would have thought that any one in Lady Elizabeth’s position could have acted with such mean, ungrateful treachery? And what a wickedly cruel woman! Five thousand pounds! why that could be nothing to so exceedingly wealthy a person as she is.”

“Oh! that was merely a veil thrown over the real motive,” made answer Lady Frances: “of course her true reason was revenge upon Reginald for not loving her—or at any rate marrying her. Marry such a tigress! She knew well, too, she is no favourite of Hyacinth’s and mine, nor ever was; so her act of vengeance was intended to be quite in the Gunpowder Plot fashion—to blow up the whole house, in fact. Papa is too good natured to show it, but he did not like her either.”

“She must have anticipated a disclosure of her wickedness on the capture of the man, or she would hardly have left the duchess in so unceremonious a haste,” quoth I. “Have you any idea who the writer of the anonymous letter was?”

“Judging by its style, we *suspect*—but that is all—it came from the keeper of some

menagerie, or one of the principals, perhaps, of the very animal show whose hideous baboon was the author of our terrible calamity."

After a while we talked much touching Lady Fanny's own affairs ; and then we parted.

This morning Charles and I went with the count and Lady Frances to their wedding : aye, and to my joy—for very dear and beautiful in my eyes is sisterly affection—Lady Hyacinth, whom at my entreaty Lady Fanny at the last took into her confidence, was also present. Yes, and very tender and loving was she throughout; and gentle, plentiful tears were shed at parting,—verily, my own flowed without stint.

" Oh, let me come soon, and stay with you in your beautiful château, Fanny !" entreated Lady Hyacinth in sobbing voice. " I shall feel so miserably dull till I am with you once more, my own darling sister !" and again and again did the maidens lovingly embrace each other.

All her pride and haughtiness were gone. Ah, thought I, if you only knew how far more sweet and charming you are in your present

mood, I am sure you would never resume your former unwinsome character, Lady Cinth.

To me, also, and to dear Charles did the Count and Countess d'Alton give an earnest, graceful invitation to their château, which is situate on the outskirts of Paris. A most costly necklace, too, and brooch to match they, to wit the bride and bridegroom, insisted on my receiving, albeit I urged that such-like sumptuous adornment was unsuited to a plain simple maiden as I am.

"Oh, is it?" saith Lady Frances, with meaning smile and voice; "ask Major Bell if *he* thinks so." This brought the colour into my cheeks, and stopped my further objections.

Ah, but far, far more beauteous and precious to me were the jewels set within the golden words she murmured in mine ear while affectionately kissing me.

"I know," said she, "I shall gladden your noble, philanthropic heart, dear Miss Beechley, when I tell you that a very different—thank God, a *very* different—soul do I take away with me, to the dark, the clouded one I brought to Riversdale. Yes, and to you and your truly excellent father, and also, I may add, to



that fine-spirited, magnificent creature, Ennis Denzell (Dormer, I mean), am I indebted under God for the change. Never had I seen religion impart so bright, so beautifying, in short, so captivating an aspect to persons and things as since my stay in Riversdale. Poor, pretty little village! I have been more sorry than I can express at hearing of the injury our example, and more particularly that of all our foreign and London servants, has wrought amongst the simple country people. But you know—you have heard, have you not?—that papa and mamma are intending to leave Riversdale almost immediately?”

“No,” said I, my heart giving a great bound of joy at these words, while involuntarily a silent “Thank God!” went up from my soul. Poor, beautiful Riversdale! it might not yet be too late to restore it to its former sweet state of peace and innocence! “No; this is the first mention I have heard of the subject.”

“Yes; they have quite decided to go in a fortnight. Poor Gurty was, you know, the sole motive of our coming here,” added the young bride, sadly, “and, that reason removed,

they are free to go whenever and wherever they like."

"Oh!" I said nothing more. What could I say? Courtesy forbade—nay, even gratitude also forbade—my confessing it was a matter of joyfulness to me that friends who had been so kind and hospitable to me and mine were about to quit the neighbourhood, perchance for years, if not for ever; and truth would not, of course, allow the utterance of one word in opposition to itself.

Lady Frances saw my perplexity, and smiled; but now she was forced to bid me farewell, for the count, who had been holding earnest converse with Charles, approached to take away his sweet young wife.

With much grateful and tearful affection did she respond to my embrace, the while I murmured a heartfelt prayer that God would, of His tender mercy, preserve and guide and finally bring her and her noble husband to His glorious kingdom for evermore. Anon they and Lady Hyacinth, who also was very soft and gracious in her farewell unto Charles and myself, departed; and I and he returned to the Rectory.

Saith he, as we drove along,—

“Dr. Carlinez—I have so long known and loved him by that name I cannot speak of him now by any other—Dr. Carlinez has just said he perceives so decided an improvement in the whole expression of my countenance, especially my eyes, that he is firmly of opinion if I devote the next two or three years to quiet travelling—visiting far-off lands in all parts of the world—cheering my spirits and strengthening my constitution,—my brain will sympathize with these good effects and become permanently restored to health.”

“Thank God!” said I, trembling, and laying my hand on his; then added, with sudden apprehension, “but, Charles, you will not go alone? you—you will take one with you who will love and care for you—yes, care more for your life and happiness than for her own?”

A spasm, as though from some keen pain, passed across his brow. Alas! thought I, is that old heart-wound still so unclosed that the slightest touch can make him thus shrink? He sat up, and, drawing a deep breath, said drearily, albeit firmly,—

“Not alone; she will go with me. She,

Dora, knows all ; knows how much I value and esteem her, and how grateful I am for her gentle, modest affection. My love will come in time, if she but wait patiently for it—wait patiently,” he repeated, a ring of impatience in his voice that grieved me to hear. Howbeit I only said—for of no avail is it to argue with a restless spirit too full of pain and distress to heed your words—it doth but chafe and worry and anger—so said I, soothingly,—

“She will be anything you wish, dear brother—anything ; be sure of that.”

A long space hath again elapsed since last I writ in my diary. I am now settled in my new home, and, thanks be to my heavenly Father, am very, very happy, for all those I love most on earth are happy too.

A maiden sister of my dear father's, a woman of a wise and cheerful disposition and pious character, hath taken my place in the old Rectory-house, and tends to and comforts him after her kindly fashion.

Charles and his loving wife Dora are delighting them among the magnificent beauties of America ; and oh ! it rejoices my heart to

perceive, in the style of every letter he sends me, signs of an increasing, strengthening spirit of trustful rest, and of love—aye, of love—for the faithful companion in his wanderings.

Ennis, too, hath returned to her old home, as so it was arranged—a home doubly endeared to her heart by the many sweet child and girlhood's memories clinging around it, and by the presence of her doting grandmother.

Dear child ! restrained by those new feelings of womanly dignity, the which she thinketh it incumbent upon her to now assume in honour of her wifely position, she is, if possible, more winsome than ever. Howbeit, merrily forgotten at times is this same wifely importance, as I can testify ; aye, and no whit behind in such-like want of remembrance is Mr. Harry.

One day last month (December)—a bright, cold day, still, and with patches of snow lying here and there where the sun's rays could not fall upon them—I stood alone at the window of the Oriel drawing-room awaiting the coming in of Lady Denzell, whom I wished to consult touching some village business. Of a sudden the distant ringing sound of young, gay voices

broke the wintry silence. It drew nearer and nearer, and anon Harry Dormer, running speedily, issued from out a side walk, followed in close pursuit by his would-be dignified wife. Her hat had fallen off, and the light air raised by her movements tossed to and fro her luxuriant hair, the while she mercilessly pelted him with snowballs. And how they did laugh, that boy and girl husband and wife. As I listened, tears of thankfulness dimmed mine eyes when I bethought me that not in far-off loneliness and sorrow was my poor, long-afflicted brother wandering, but in his quiet way was now as happy and peaceful as was this fair creature whom he had loved so deeply, albeit fruitlessly.

This morning I got me a letter from Lady Frances D'Alton, a cheery epistle, and after much courteous and kindly writing, and a warm invite from herself and the count of my husband and me to their beautiful château, she doth continue:—"Lady Elizabeth Bristow is going to be married, and whom think you to? Mr. Desmond! Reginald, who is at present in London, was my informant, and he says that

words cannot express the wonder of all her friends and acquaintance what motive could have induced a woman of her wealth and position to accept such a man—a man possessed of neither money, looks, rank, cleverness, nor, in short, of any recommendation under the sun.

“But, however strange her conduct might appear to the rest of the world, to us, dear Mrs. Bell, who were behind the sad scene from first to last, it contains no mystery. It is, as Reginald says, simply a case of the ‘biter bit.’ Like many cunning people, Elizabeth, while plotting to catch others, was herself caught; for by bribing that needy Mr. Desmond, which I know she did, to assist her in carrying out her cruel, dishonourable intentions, she put herself completely into his power—a power which his intimacy with her taught him how to use most advantageously for his own interests. Despite the meanness of her actions, there does not exist in all England a prouder woman than Elizabeth, and, because of that very pride, a greater slave to the world’s opinions; and her reckless casting aside of all common prudence when trying to effect her wicked purpose at the Castle—a purpose that, but for you, might,

in a measure, have been carried out—proves how violently revengeful were her feelings.

“Common prudence! Imagine a worldly wise woman like Elizabeth writing a number of letters to the keeper of the menagerie—undisguised, excepting for the absence of her signature—each letter in a style, and containing matter, which, if published to the world, would stamp her in its estimation as one of the most odiously dishonourable creatures in existence! These treacherous missives she secretly conveyed to the Riversdale post, and as stealthily went for the answers. Now in some way Mr. Desmond discovered her mysterious correspondence; and what did he afterwards—that is, when the poor child was dead—but go off to the receiver of the letters, and purchase them all, paying an exorbitant sum for each. This my husband was told by his old acquaintance, the keeper of the wild-beast show, who, despite his savage calling, seemed, the count said, intensely disgusted with ‘the lady,’ upon whom he laid the blame of the whole affair from first to last, declaring that right glad was he to obtain at her cost some compensation for his loss and disappointment.”



Armed with such indisputable evidences of her guilt, you and I, dear Mrs. Bell, can pretty well guess the kind of use so moneyless and uncompunctious a man as this Desmond would be likely to turn them to. I must confess, however, he has certainly effected a far more successful stroke of business than I could have believed possible.

I must now lay down my pen for a while and run away, for I hear my dear husband's voice in the hall. He has been out shooting since morning, and always likes me to be with him on his return home, there being divers little matters in the performing of which none doth please him so well as myself.

THE END.







